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# THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE

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MY SISTER THE ACTRESS

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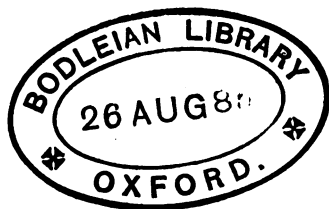
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TO  
ADRIENNE,  
WHOSE HAND WAS THE FIRST HELD OUT TO ME  
IN FELLOWSHIP ON THIS SIDE THE ATLANTIC,  
I DEDICATE THIS STORY.

NEW YORK,  
*May*, 1885.



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# THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE.

A LOVE STORY.



## CHAPTER I.

“THE PROPOSAL.”

THE scene is laid in London; the time is 1880.

General Fuller is sitting in his library-chair, turning an ivory paper-knife thoughtfully round and round in his hands, and the Earl of Mountcarron is sitting opposite to him

The general is a man in the prime of life, but his hair is grey. He has a beautiful face, delicately moulded features, and a sympathetic expression, but an undecided look about the mouth which proves that he

rules less easily than he is ruled—at least at home. In the barrack-yard or on the parade ground he has never found any difficulty in enforcing his commands, but in the domestic circle he is invariably worsted. It is this knowledge that has given the patient, almost pathetic, look to his eyes, the resigned expression to his countenance. At the present moment he looks puzzled—almost alarmed.

Lord Mountcarron is a very different type of man from his friend. He is thoroughly material. He is a materialist, not because his researches after the truth have left him floundering in that Slough of Despond, but because his nature does not contain sufficient spirituality to raise him above such a belief. He cannot grasp a higher doctrine. But there is nothing objectionable in his appearance, which most people would pronounce to be very agreeable. He is young, not more than thirty. He possesses good features, dark glossy hair, a bold eye, and a self-confident air



which carries all before it, and bespeaks an assurance of victory. He is well-dressed, moreover—not like a tailor's model, but a man of fashion—and his manners have the ease and good breeding of one who is used to the best society. And yet General Fuller looks at him askance, and with evident suspicion.

"Do I make myself perfectly understood?" asks the earl presently. "Have I left anything unsaid?"

"I think not, Lord Mountcarron. Your offer appears to me as straightforward as it is honourable, and—and—flattering to my daughter and myself."

"The advantages to be derived during my lifetime I have already pointed out. The provision made in case of my death is a very liberal one, as my solicitors can inform you. The dower-house and dowry of the widowed countesses of Mountcarron are more than adequate to their rank, and in case of her giving me an heir, your daughter would possess almost as

large an income after my death as before it."

"I understand you perfectly, but——"

"Added to this," continues the earl eagerly, "I am prepared to make such a settlement upon Miss Fuller for her lifetime as shall render her perfectly independent of a family, or myself."

"I have nothing to say against your proposals or yourself, Lord Mountcarron. They are most liberal—more than liberal—and the marriage is a much higher one than my daughter had any reason to expect to make, yet——"

"You have some objection, General Fuller! Pray mention it plainly."

"My daughter is very young," commences the general, in a hesitating manner.

"Pardon me, Miss Fuller has completed her nineteenth year, and I was nine-and-twenty on my last birthday. Surely these are suitable ages."

"But you have seen so little of each other."

"As much, I fancy, as most men and women do before they marry," replies Lord Mountcarron, with a smile. "I had the honour to be introduced to Miss Fuller last season, and we have met constantly since, and, I think I may say, with the full approval of her mother."

General Fuller shrugs his shoulders. He knows that his wife would approve of any one who had a handle to his name.

"And you believe," he continues, after a pause, "you believe my daughter likes you?"

"She has done me the honour to tell me so," replies the earl with a self-satisfied air.

"When did you speak to her?"

"Last night, at the Campbells'. I do not think Miss Fuller was unprepared for my offer. She accepted me without hesitation, conditionally, of course, on your consent, and fixed the time herself for my referring the matter to you. I sincerely

trust you will not refuse to second her decision."

"Lord Mountcarron, I have but one object in view, my daughter's happiness. I do not believe in coercing girls in such a matter as marriage, even if it were possible. My eldest daughter married according to her own wishes, and Gladys shall do the same. But she has not spoken to me on this subject yet, and until she has done so, I can say nothing definite."

"If it is to rest with Miss Fuller, I am quite satisfied," replies Lord Mountcarron, rising; "but I trust you will not keep me in suspense longer than is necessary. When may I hope to hear from you, general?"

"To-morrow. I will write to you without fail to-morrow."

"*A demain*, then," says the earl lightly, as he holds out his hand. General Fuller takes it, but he does not smile.

"The matter will rest entirely with Gladys," he repeats, and then, as Lord Mountcarron disappears, he sinks back in

his arm-chair and gives himself up to thought. He is not like other fathers. He has not seen his children grow up beside him from infancy to man and womanhood, and when it comes to a question of their minds and feelings, he is perplexed. All his life has been spent in India. He has lived there, with short intervals of home-coming, ever since he was a subaltern, and he has parted with his sons and daughters, one after another, to go to England, until they are almost strangers to him.

His last term of absence extended over five years, during which period his daughters shot up into women, and were introduced to Society, and one of them married, under the auspices of their mother. And now the general has retired from active service, and returned home for good, to find himself somewhat of an outsider in the domestic circle—a stranger to most of their friends, and most of their secrets.

He finds himself a stranger also to some-

thing still more important—the ways and manners of the fashionable world of 1880. Thirty years in India make a man rather old-fashioned. He retains the opinions of his youth. He has not kept pace with the rapidly advancing world, and its creeds and doctrines, especially from the lips of the young, are apt to startle him.

General Fuller is, for his age, a very innocent old man. He thinks of his girls as he thought of other people's girls when he was himself but nineteen or twenty—as ingenuous, artless, innocent creatures, who will blush at the mention of marriage, and hardly dare raise their eyes in the presence of a man. He has only heard Lord Mountcarron's name mentioned, amongst those of many others, as an acquaintance of the family, and he cannot believe it possible that his laughter-loving Gladys, who seems so fancy free, can have had her heart seriously attracted to this man without having betrayed the fact. The general is fully alive to the advantages of a marriage

with Lord Mountcarron. It will be a great match for his portionless daughter—a great rise in the social scale for her. But he determines that she shall not be biassed in her decision in any way. The dear, guileless fellow believes that she would shrink with horror from marrying any man unless she were desperately in love with him, and he pictures his sweet Gladys alternately crying and arguing with her mother whilst Mrs. Fuller places before her all the advantages of the match, and urges her to sacrifice her inclinations for the good of her family.

"*I won't have it,*" thinks the general, with unusual determination. "I have seen the misery of loveless marriages and unequal marriages, and I won't have my little girl persuaded to do anything against her own wishes. The more I think of it, the more I feel sure she cannot care for this man. Why, I can't remember ever hearing her mention his name, except as a dancing partner. It is terrible to think of



launching two young creatures on life's journey with no better knowledge of each other than that. The child must have referred him to me simply because she did not know what to say to him herself. The sooner I talk to her about it the better. But it is a very delicate matter. I shall hardly know how to set about it." And the general actually feels quite nervous as he rings the library bell and desires the servant to ask Miss Fuller to come and speak to him for a few moments. It is not long before Miss Fuller appears. She knows perfectly well why she is wanted. She and her mother have watched Lord Mountcarron's phaeton, with its perfectly matched horses, drive up to the door and drive away again, and wondered why the library bell did not ring before. When the servant appears with the general's message, Miss Gladys says:

"I hope the dear old dad is not going to preach at me about it for an hour, for I promised Miss Cleveland she should intro-

duce her brother to me at the Ansteys' this afternoon," and Mrs. Fuller adds: "If they want you to fix the day at once, Gladys, don't make it later than July, or you'll spoil our summer trip," and then the girl runs downstairs without the slightest embarrassment, and pops her smiling face into the library door. It is a very lovely face, and there is little doubt from whom she inherits it. The same rich blue eyes, and regular features, and delicate mouth, and oval face, that have made General Fuller's beauty a famous thing, are reproduced in his daughter. But in Gladys' case they are crowned with a wealth of soft chesnut hair, and poised upon a figure of such airy, lissom grace, that the girl is a marvel of elegance. Her wild-rose face has so little consciousness in it, and her manner so little confusion, that her father believes it quite impossible she can guess what lies before her. He has still to be initiated into the cool worldliness of the girls of 1880.

“Sweet old dad!” says Gladys, as a preliminary, as she seats herself on his knee and kisses him at random. She is the general’s favourite child, partly because she is so like himself, and partly because she is so much at home with him. Five years is a long time from fifteen to twenty, and when he returned home to settle some six months before, he had found his children rather shy with him. His eldest daughter Winifred was married to a Mr. Prendergast, a young barrister with a private income, and had already established a little circle of her own. His boys—three cubs from twelve to sixteen—were as uninteresting and unsympathetic as their sex usually becomes during the transformation scene, whilst in his wife the general had never found a congenial companion. It remained for Gladys to usurp the vacant throne in his breast, and she did it at once. This charming creature—whose very effrontery he mistakes for the ingenuousness of childhood—who has never shown any fear of

him or his opinions, but blurts out her own without restraint and smothers his disapproval in kisses—is the general's greatest delight; in fact, she is his idol. The idea of parting with her at all is pain to him, and rather than her maidenly modesty should be outraged—her delicacy wounded—her inclinations forced in ever so small a degree—he would break stones to support her to his life's end.

And Gladys returns her father's affection as far as she is able. It cannot make her forsake the creed in which her mother and the fashionable world have reared her, but it commands her admiration. She has never met a man like her father before. Whilst she laughs inwardly at his old-fashioned ideas of propriety, she takes care not to offend them. He has never yet spoken to her of love and matrimony, but she instinctively feels that his views will differ from hers in the matter, and whilst she kisses him, she is wondering what she shall tell him with respect to the earl.

"Dear, sweet old dad," she repeats lovingly, with another shower of kisses. The general holds her a little from him, and scrutinises her fair face anxiously. No, she guesses nothing. It is like a rosy-tinted, waxen petal. The general sighs as he enters on his task. It seems like sacrilege to mention marriage to such a pure-looking creature.

"What a sigh, darling! What's the matter?" says Gladys.

"Can you guess who has been with me, Gladys?"

"There's no need to guess. We saw him go. Lord Mountcarron."

"And you know *why* he came to see me?"

"Why, of course, dad. He spoke to me yesterday."

"What did he say, Gladys?"

"Oh! the usual thing."

The general cannot help smiling.

"*The usual thing!* My dear little girl, we must be playing at cross purposes. I

mean—did he—did the earl—say anything to you about—about—marriage?"

Gladys' beautiful eyes open laughingly.

"What else could he say, dad? It was all plain enough. It was I who sent him to you."

"But you did not accept him, Gladys?"

"Yes, I did—*flat*. Didn't he understand?"

"You accepted him, my dear—promised to marry him?"

"I said I couldn't *promise* exactly without asking you; but I had no doubt of what you would say. I thought you would be awfully pleased. Aren't you?"

"Yes, my dear, yes; that is, if *you* are, but——"

"Why, it's the best match of the season, father. They said he was engaged to one of the Rothschilds last year; but something broke it off—luckily for me."

"Then you wish to marry him, Gladys?"

"Why, of course I do. What a queer old dad you are. I suppose you think I

ought to have spoken to you about it before; but I wasn't quite sure, you see, and I hate to speak of such things before they come off. It makes one look such a fool if anything happens."

"But you must have felt very anxious, my dear child. How long is it since you suspected that—that Lord Mountcarron loved you?"

Gladys laughs carelessly.

"Oh! that was evident enough three months ago, dad; in fact, he's been hanging about me for more than six. But one can never be quite sure, you know. Men so often change their minds, and I hate to hear girls talking about the proposals they expect to have."

"But six months," says the general uneasily. "He had no right to keep you in suspense all that time. I wish I had known it sooner. You must have suffered terribly, my darling."

"Oh! no, dad, I didn't. I knew if it *was* to be, it *would* be, and it was no good



worrying about it. But it's all right now, and mother will be half frantic with delight. She has been always prophesying I should lose him, because I was not sharp enough."

The general frowns.

"Your mother naturally thinks more of the title and fortune than the man; but *you*—you are sure you *love* the earl, Gladys?"

No blushes, no confusion, only a pair of elevated eyebrows, and then a look cast down at her pretty finger-nails—a look that was not quite bold enough to meet her father's eyes.

"Oh, yes, dad, as well as I shall ever love anybody."

"But, my dear child, what do you know about love?"

"Quite as much as I want to know, father. I'm not that sort of girl, you know."

"What do you mean by '*not that sort of girl*'?"

"Not one of those spooney girls who are always talking about love, and men, and kisses, and all that kind of rubbish. I should hate it. It would make me miserable."

"My dear, you have never tried it."

"And I never mean to. I have seen other people try it, and that's quite enough for me. I wouldn't make what is called a love match for the world. They always turn out a mistake."

This is quite a new phase of young ladyhood for the general's contemplation, and it surprises him so much that he hardly knows what to answer.

"I cannot imagine," he says at length, "a woman marrying anyone she does not love."

"But I don't see any obstacle to loving Lord Mountcarron. I think he's awfully nice, don't you? I would not have accepted him if he had not been. He is good-looking—gentlemanly, and has agreeable manners. He has every advantage in

the way of money and position, and he's very fond of me. What can one want more?"

"I should have liked to have heard you say, you were very fond of him, Gladys."

"Oh, dad, that would have spoiled it all! What good on earth is love, except to make one jealous and wretched, and always afraid that something is going to happen? Besides, you know, father, that it never lasts."

"My dear, at your age you ought to believe that it lasts."

"Well, then, I can't. My eyes are too wide open. I see too well what is passing in the world around me. Do you suppose I don't hear all the confidences the married women repose in mama? They don't seem to be able to abuse their husbands enough. It's a wonder they have not set me against marrying at all."

"But, Gladys, many women marry for love only, and are very happy."

"Are they, dad? I wish you'd point a

few out to me. There's Jessie Randall—you remember Jessie, don't you, dear? a little fair girl with big eyes—who married Arthur Anstey, she told Winnie last week that if she could undo it by giving up one half of her existence she would."

"But these are wicked, discontented wives, Gladys. I would not have you like one of them for all the world; but depend upon it, no marriage ever turned out well that was not entered into for love."

"Why, dad, look at Mary Hamilton."

"Mary Hamilton!" echoes the general indignantly. "If I thought that one of my girls could marry, as Mary Hamilton did, a little crippled, cross-eyed creature, that she utterly despised, I would disown her. I would refuse to acknowledge her as my flesh and blood."

Gladys laughs softly.

"Oh, dad, you're too hard on Sir Charles! He is really not a bad little fellow. Mary is very happy. She scarcely ever sees anything of him."

"But that is not the aim of marriage, child, to keep apart as much as possible."

"It is the only guarantee for a happy marriage, father. Now, Sir Charles and Mary never quarrel. He was in Norway for eight months last year, and he is going to Mentone this winter. And she can do exactly as she likes the whole time he is away."

The general groans.

"What tastes," he asks, in despair, "what tastes have you and Lord Mountcarron in common?"

"None, I am thankful to say, except, perhaps, dancing, and I hope he'll give that up after we're married. He'll get stout, won't he, dad? He's just the sort of man to get stout."

"And you will be content, then, to live a separate life from your husband?"

"Well, I shan't want him fooling round me all day long. Father, if I thought any man could make eyes at me in public like

young Rawson does at his wife, I'd never marry at all. You don't know me, dear. I hate all that sort of thing. It would bore me to death. But Mountcarron is too sensible to subject me to it. He knows that in our world it would not 'obtain.' When did you say he should have your answer, dad?"

"I said I would write to him to-morrow. But, Gladys, I must speak further with you upon this subject first. It is a very, very serious one. You must not decide hastily."

"I haven't. I decided months ago," says the girl.

"Wouldn't it be better to talk with your sister or—or—your mother first?"

"*With mother!*" repeats Gladys, smiling. "Why, dad, mother's in love with the earl herself! She'd take him like a shot, if you were out of the way. Mother says love in marriage does more mischief than anything else in this world."

"Ah! your mother—well, of course, she

is getting on. She has forgotten what she felt when she was young. But Winnie, Gladys. Winnie is a good girl, and fond of her husband. She will give you good advice. Promise me you will consult Winnie before giving Lord Mountcarron his final answer."

Gladys shrugs her pretty shoulders.

"Of course I will, if you wish it, dad Winnie and Maurice are coming to dinner to-night, and I will have a good talk with her before she goes, and tell her just how the land lies."

Her father looks relieved.

"That's a dear child. I feel sure that Winnie will advise you to wait till you have sounded your heart. And now you can go, dear, and leave me to think over it alone."

The girl kisses him effusively, and walks slowly towards the door. As she reaches it she turns and says :

"Was your marriage with mamma a love match, dad?"



The general is completely taken aback.  
He can scarcely stammer out an answer.

“No—yes!—of course it was. Why do you ask, my dear?”

“Nothing,” says Gladys, as she disappears.



## CHAPTER II.

### “ THE SISTERS. ”

SHE leaves her father perturbed and uneasy. What chord has she struck in his long slumbering heart? Why does he begin to doubt if he has advised his favourite child for the best? The fact is, his own marriage has been anything but a happy one. Mrs. Fuller is a lady by birth, but she is a woman of bad taste, and of overbearing and dominant manners, and she has crushed all the pride and pleasure out of her husband's life from the first hour they were brought together. And yet their union was supposed to be one of mutual affection. She was a fresh-looking, high-spirited girl in the days when he fell in love with her, and believed she had the

power to re-create a vanished happiness for him. For as General Fuller sits there dreaming of the past, another face rises on the background of his memory—a fair, pale face, with sad, haunting eyes, and cold lips, that tremblingly pronounce “farewell.”

No one knows that secret of his past life except himself. No one guesses at the insurmountable obstacle that rose between him and the fruition of his first love. But General Fuller has not forgotten it, though five-and-twenty years lie between.

That sad farewell proved the key-note of his life. It was followed by months of despair and years of tender regret. And then he met his wife, and the pale past faded out of sight for awhile, beneath the influence of her youth and buoyant health and spirits. She had brought colour and warmth into his life again, and Gerald Fuller had believed his passion for her to be the reality and the other the dream, and had gladly commenced the battle of life with her. But the attainable once obtained,

the jog-trot of matrimony entered upon, and the novelty of female companionship over, he had found (like many others) that the ideal had become the real, and the poetry of the past triumphed over the prose of the present. But he had not complained, and he had not betrayed himself. Year by year Mrs. Fuller became more dominant, more overbearing, and more oppressive, and year by year her husband shrunk more into himself, and sought refuge in communion with his past.

It was a source of wonder on both sides of the family when he called his eldest daughter "Winifred." No one belonging to either of them bore that name, and his wife considered it both fantastical and ridiculous. But her husband had his way. To have a right to pronounce that name, even though it echoed only on his heart, was a sort of comfort to him, and he never pronounced it without a reverential inflection, that made strangers think his eldest child was his especial favourite.

And now Gladys, whose happiness was trembling in the balance, his dearly-loved Gladys, had stirred the most sacred depths of her father's heart by asking him if his marriage with her mother had been one of love?

"If it were," thinks the general uneasily. "If it were so, then I must keep my mouth shut for ever more. And yet, there *must* be happy marriages. If I and—and—*Winifred* had come together——"

But here he turns his face away, as though to shut out a too painful memory. Even to himself, after a lapse of five-and-twenty years, he cannot think what *that* marriage would have been like, without a bitter sigh of regret. The conversation with his daughter has shocked and pained him. It has startled him also. If these are the opinions his children have imbibed from their mother's teaching, he shall never blame himself sufficiently for having left them at her side so long. To ignore the necessity of love, to look on it as a positive

evil, and marriage as a commercial speculation, in which the less sentiment is infused the better, breaks all the theories that Gerald Fuller has cherished for a lifetime.

His poetical, dreamy nature has lived in romance of the past, and to hear his own child—his little girl, who was but yesterday, as it were, running about with short petticoats and cropped hair—laugh at his old-fashioned sentiments, and assure him that the less of such folly one infused in life the better, has greatly upset him.

It is as though Gladys had told him he had been a fool to waste his time lamenting an impossibility, and which, had he gained it, would probably have turned out the greater disappointment of the two. The general feels as if he had received a moral *douche*, and he sits there shivering under the application, and wondering if he has really understood what his child meant. Meanwhile, Miss Gladys, driving in the brougham with her mother to the Anstey's

afternoon tea, is giving Mrs. Fuller her version of the story.

"Well, dear, I suppose it's all settled?" says the elder lady.

"I don't know, mother. I suppose it will come right in the end, but I'm afraid dad is going to make a fuss about it."

"A fuss, my dear! On what account? Are not the settlements liberal enough? Lord Mountcarron bears the character of being a most generous man."

"Oh, no! it's not that. I fancy the money business is entirely satisfactory. But dad has taken it into his head that I don't love Mountcarron enough, and that I shall be miserable."

Mrs. Fuller lifts her hands.

"What utter folly! Just like one of your poor father's old-fashioned ideas! My dear child, he has the most extraordinary notions. He has not the slightest knowledge of how these matters are conducted in high life. India ruins a man for society. But what did you say?"

"I told him I cared as much for Mountcarron as I should ever do for any man. You know, mother, I'm not a sentimental fool! I should be ashamed to be."

"And I should be ashamed to see you so, my dear. What can your father be thinking of? But you must make allowances for him, Gladys. Men from India positively know nothing. He was brought up in the country, and I suppose he expects to see all lovers walking about with their arms round each other's waists."

Gladys is infinitely amused.

"Fancy Mountcarron and I, strolling under the trees in Hyde Park encircling each other's waists! I don't believe I could get my arm round his. Was that the way father made love to you, mother?"

"Oh, my dear, don't talk of it. Yes! I suppose it was. We were out in India, you know, and there was no one to see what we did. But such things are conducted differently in society. And I think it is quite indecent of your father talking to a young



girl like you about displaying your love for a man. He should be the first to admire your reticence. No one thinks the better of a woman for making an open display of her affection.

"And he is so pertinacious, mother. I told him that I care for Mountcarron and wish to marry him. I can't say more, can I? But dad declares he will not send him an answer till I have consulted you and Winifred. As if *that* could make me alter my mind on the subject."

"Ah, well, never mind, my dear, Winnie will be with us this evening, and she will make papa write to Lord Mountcarron before she leaves. The idea of his giving us so much trouble! One would think the earl was some penniless subaltern. It is very awkward too. Mrs. Anstey never sees me without asking if the proposal has come off yet, and I shall hardly know what to say to her."

"Tell her I am engaged to him," says Gladys decidedly, "because I shall

be to-morrow. You don't suppose I am going to let dad cheat me out of being a countess, mother?"

"I should hope not," laughs Mrs. Fuller, as the carriage draws up at Mrs. Anstey's door.

The rooms are crowded, but the lovely Miss Fuller, whom rumour says is so soon to be transformed into the Countess of Mountcarron, becomes at once the object of universal attraction. Gladys is looking uncommonly pretty. Her little discussion with her mother has tinged her usually pale cheek with a most becoming colour, and her cream-coloured costume and large hat with its drooping feathers, set off her graceful figure to the utmost advantage.

Miss Cleveland's brother, a good-looking young officer, is soon by her side engaged in an animated conversation, and looking all the admiration he dares not express, whilst she, as fancy-free as any girl in the room, enjoys her vicarious flirtation with

him without a thought of the absent earl, or the coming marriage

“What is this rumour I hear going round the room, Gladys?” whispers Miss Cleveland to her presently. “Is it *un fait accompli* between you and the earl? Are you ready for my congratulations?”

Gladys smiles, and nods her head.

“If you consider marriage a subject for congratulation, Nelly—yes!”

“But *such* a marriage, my dear! A coronet and twenty thousand a year! Why you are the luckiest girl of the season.”

“Is it twenty thousand?” demands Miss Fuller carelessly. “I fancied it was thirty. But any way, Nelly, of course I know that I’m lucky. He’s a very good-natured fellow, and not bad looking, is he? I prefer fair men myself, but one can’t have everything.”

“Oh, no, of course not; besides which, what does it signify what a girl’s husband

is like. He is generally the man she sees least of." Gladys laughs.

"I wish my father could hear you. He preached me a sermon of about an hour long this afternoon on the duties of loving one's husband. He expects every one to go about the world squeezing each other's hands. He never thinks of the inconvenience of it."

Miss Cleveland looks incredulous.

"Does he really? You must be joking, Gladys! Love is the last thing one thinks about in marriage, now-a-days. Not but what I consider you are very 'spooney' on Lord Mountcarron. Mrs. Carmichael was saying yesterday you were quite *gone*."

Gladys knits her brows into a frown of displeasure.

"Did she? How very annoying! Do contradict it, Nelly, if you hear it said again. There's nothing I would sooner resent than being supposed to be such a fool—like a great, awkward schoolgirl!

Of course, I like and admire Mountcarron excessively. There is no one I like better. And he is absurdly in love with me. But there it ends. One person is quite enough enough to do that sort of thing in married life. We owe *something* to the world."

"And you'll pay whatever you owe it, like a brick, I'm sure of that," whispers Nelly Cleveland, "and there won't be a prettier nor more dignified countess from one end of Britain to the other."

"Thank you, dear," says Miss Fuller, with a gratified air. "I hope I shall know how to fulfil the duties of my position, but your assurance pleases me none the less for that."

When she returns home, however, and finds her sister already arrived and waiting for them, she does not put off her confidence until they can have the "good long talk" together, but rushes into the subject at once.

"Winnie, dear, I'm *so* annoyed! Have you seen dad?"

"No, he is out. What has annoyed you?"

"Mountcarron proposed to me at the Campbells', yesterday."

"O! I *am* glad! I knew it must come, but now your mind will be at rest. Gladys, my darling, I *cannot* tell you how pleased I am! Let me congratulate you a thousand times! If it were any woman but yourself I could almost find it in my heart to be jealous."

She comes up to her sister as she speaks, and puts her hands on her shoulders, and kisses her warmly. Mrs. Prendergast is not nearly so pretty as Miss Fuller. She takes more after her mother. She is cast altogether, in a bigger and coarser mould, but she has the same sweet, dark blue eyes, and winning expression, and she is very much attached to her younger sister.

"I am so very, *very* glad," she reiterates. "but after such good news, what *can* you have to vex you?"

"It's dad, dear! You see how pleased

you are, and so is mother, and so am I, naturally. But father isn't. Lord Mountcarron was with him for more than an hour, this afternoon, but he wouldn't give him a decided answer, and he says he won't do it, either, until I have thoroughly searched my heart on the subject."

"What have you to search your heart about?"

"To see if I love him."

"But you *do* love him, don't you?"

"Of course I do, and I tell dad so, but he won't believe me. I suppose he expected me to simper, and blush, and cry. I told him I hated that sort of thing, and that whatever I feel he will never see me evince it. Fancy, Winnie, going about—in the nineteenth century—glaring at one another in public, and squeezing hands under the table. It's like a dairymaid."

"Does papa want you to do that?"

"He seems to think I ought to. He thinks it is awful of me to call it folly. And he is quite capable of telling Mount-

carron I don't care for him, and spoiling the whole thing."

"Papa doesn't understand," remarks Mrs. Prendergast, reflectively. People don't confess to such things in public. He cannot expect you to do more than *say* you love him."

"I told him I had made up my mind months ago, and wanted him to send the poor man his answer at once. But he said I must talk with you first—that you loved your husband, and would give me the best advice."

"That's all rubbish!" says Winnie decisively. "One woman cannot advise another in the matter of marriage. We must each decide for ourselves. What suited me, might not suit you. I must talk to papa as soon as dinner is over."

"Do, dear! and just tell him the truth. I wish to marry Lord Mountcarron. I can't say more. And I don't see that even a father has any right to interfere with my private feelings."



"Of course poor old dad means it for the best. He's awfully fond of you, Gladys. But he's too old to judge of such things. He has probably forgotten all about them by now. Besides the times are altered, and women are altered too. We are not the sweet, confiding, clinging creatures we used to be. We are able to stand alone. And what we require in marriage is, a congenial companion and a suitable settlement. Isn't it?"

"Yes, only don't tell dad so! Tell him I'm *awfully in love* with Mountcarron, but I don't know how to show it properly. I'm too young."

Here the two girls laugh heartily—Gladys indeed until the tears come into her eyes.

"It is too funny to hear dad talk," she says presently. "Life wouldn't be worth living if we went about throwing one's whole soul into that of another person, as he would have us do."

"He's a darling," asserts her sister,

"and if there were more men like him, there would be more women in love in the world."

"I agree with you there," says Gladys, as she links her arm in Winnie's and goes downstairs.



### CHAPTER III.

#### "THE ACCEPTANCE."

WHEN Mrs. Prendergast meets her husband at her father's dinner-table it is for the first time since breakfast. He is a good-looking, clever young fellow, who has been able to surround her with all the comforts of life, and their union (which took place about two years previously) was supposed to be, and indeed was, entered into from no motives but those of mutual attachment. He greets her now as she enters the room, with a curt nod and the lover-like question, "How are you?"

"All right," replies Winnie indifferently.

"Anything happened?"

"No, dear! baby was very feverish this

afternoon with his teeth, and so I sent——”

“Have you been out to-day, General?” asks Mr. Prendergast, turning his back on his wife, and the troubles of his baby’s teeth, without the slightest ceremony.

The dinner passes, rather dully, as a meal is apt to do when the conversation is constrained.

The women of the party are engrossed with thoughts of the coming marriage, but dare not mention it, whilst General Fuller finds great difficulty in giving his attention to his son-in-law’s description of an interesting law suit. Mr. Prendergast is the only person at table whose mind is not wandering, and he thinks, as he generally does, that these family dinners are the stupidest things in the world. At last he devotes himself entirely to the *menu* and the General turns to his daughter.

“And what have you been doing, Winnie, since we saw you last?”

"Nothing, father, in particular. There is nothing to do."

"Nothing to do, my dear?"

"It's the same old thing day after day. It seems to me we only live to get up, and dress, and eat, and go to bed again."

"Diversified by a drive to Hampstead, or an hour spent in the intellectual amusement of chuckling to the baby," interposes Mr. Prendergast.

"You're quite right, Maurice," replies Winnie good-temperedly, "*that* is about the sum total of my enjoyment. I do think that life without money is not worth living."

"I don't *think* it—I *know* it," responds her husband.

"But, my dear child, you have a very handsome income for a young couple," remonstrates the general, "far more than your mother and I had when we commenced life together."

"Ah! now general, don't allude to that,

*please*," puts in Mrs. Fuller. "What *we* had is not the slightest criterion for our children. I am sure I never wish to see them suffer as *I* did."

"Suffer, my dear?"

"Yes—*suffer*! What else do you call it when a woman has to make all her own dresses and her children's, and wash them sometimes too into the bargain? I'd rather see my girls dead than brought so low. There! don't mention it again, or you'll spoil my dinner."

"I shouldn't envy little Arthur if he depended on you for his dresses, Winnie," laughs Gladys.

"No, indeed, my dear. I should tar and feather him and let him go. Children are quite enough nuisance in themselves, without one having to stitch away for them all day long like mantua makers."

"The effect of woman's rights, sir! the morals of the nineteenth century," remarks Prendergast to General Fuller.

"Not a bit of it," responds Winnie, "we

have not got anything like our rights yet. We are only beginning to shake off our wrongs."

The general is completely shut up, and scarcely ventures to speak during the remainder of dinner. As he enters the library to enjoy his post-prandial pipe, he is followed by his daughter Winnie, who draws a chair beside him.

"Well, father, dear, this is grand news about Gladys and Mountcarron, isn't it? Aren't you pleased?"

"Your sister has told you then, Winnie?"

"Naturally! The poor child is nearly beside herself with joy."

"She did not seem so this morning. Indeed, she made me feel quite uneasy by her indifference. I am so afraid she does not love him, Winnie."

"My dear dad! What a notion? What ever makes you think so?"

"She is so cool, so calculating about it. She says openly that she doesn't believe

in love, nor wish to entertain it. They are shocking sentiments in so young a girl, Winnie."

"Oh, father dear! you have utterly mistaken Gladys. She's just as much in love with Lord Mountcarron as she can be."

"In love with his money and his rank you mean, my dear."

"No, no, no! in love with himself. What did you expect her to do—go into raptures over his appearance, or repeat any of his soft speeches? You don't understand girls, father. The more they feel, the less they say."

The general sighs.

"Well, my dear, perhaps I don't understand them. I have been separated from you both so long, and your mother's sentiments are so very different from mine."

"Mama views things in a practical light. She sees all the advantages of such a marriage for Gladys. And I suppose you do, too, father?"



"Certainly, my dear. The match is most desirable from a worldly point of view, and if I could only be sure that Gladys loved him——"

"How you do harp on that string, father. You never worried in this way about Maurice and me."

"Because your letters spoke so warmly of your affection for him I could entertain no doubt of it, Winnie. And you *are* evry happy, my child, are you not?"

"Oh, yes, dad, as happy as most women. No one can expect unalloyed pleasure in this world, you know. But Gladys is very different from me. She is more reserved and less gushing. She cannot speak in the same open way about her feelings. But she *feels* quite as much as I do—sometimes I think she feels more. I remember when that little affair with young Harrington was broken off——"

"What little affair?" demands the general hastily.

"Didn't mother tell you? I suppose she

thought it was no use worrying you at that distance. But last year, Gladys rather compromised herself with respect to an engagement with Alfred Harrington of the War Office, and when mama interfered to break it off, she was quite ill—she fretted so."

"If he was a good fellow and she loved him, I would have managed she should be happy somehow, even if I had given up half my fortune," interposed her father with some agitation.

"Oh, dad, it would never have done. He was only a clerk in the War Office. Besides, girls have scores of such affairs before they settle down. We get used to them. But *this* is a very different matter. I don't think my sister could ever get over the disappointment of losing this marriage."

"Don't you, really? And both you and your mother consider it advisable?"

"Father, I think we should be *mad* to try and prevent it. Fancy our Gladys a countess—Countess of Mountcarron—and

mistress of all those lovely places! Why if anything happened to break it off, I don't think I should ever get over it myself."

"Well, if *that* is the general opinion, I suppose I had better write and tell the earl his offer is accepted," says the general dubiously.

"Haven't you written yet? What a shame! The poor fellow will be in such dreadful suspense. Write at once, father, and let me post the letter. Gladys will not be able to sleep until she knows it is on its way."

General Fuller sits down at his writing-table and scratches off a hasty note to Lord Mountcarron, appointing a meeting for the following morning, and then throws himself back in his chair despondently.

"There, Winnie, there's the letter. Post it if you will. I only wish I felt as jubilant about the issue of it as you seem to do."

"Sleep in peace, Lady Mountcarron,"

whispers Mrs. Prendergast gaily to her sister, as they exchange their good-night kiss. "I have the letter of acceptance in my pocket, and it will be in his hands to-morrow morning."

"That's a comfort," responds Miss Fuller in the same strain, "and now I can go to bed and dream of what my wedding-dress shall be."

She is perfectly calm and collected the next morning, whilst her father nervously paces up and down the library carpet, awaiting the advent of his future son-in-law."

Lord Mountcarron is true to his time. He is perfectly sincere, as far as his present feelings are concerned. He is very much enamoured of Gladys Fuller's beauty and charm of manner, and he knows of no woman whom he would sooner make Countess of Mountcarron.

She is portionless, and he is wealthy. She comes of commoners, and he of aristocrats. Yet he has chosen her from the world. No

one can question his motives, nor his sincerity.

General Fuller, as he reviews the immense advantages of the match, feels almost ashamed of his own misgivings.

"I need not tell you of the pleasure with which I received your letter this morning," commences the earl courteously, "although I can hardly say it was unexpected."

"I had a long talk with my daughter yesterday on the subject of her marriage with you," replies the general, ignoring compliment, "and since I find that her heart is set upon it, I had no alternative but to make you acquainted with the result."

"I felt certain I was not mistaken in Miss Fuller's sentiments respecting me," murmurs his companion.

"But I, you see, had yet to learn them. Lord Mountcarron, in giving you my daughter, Gladys, I give you my favourite and best-loved child. You

must forgive me if I appear too anxious to secure her future happiness. There is a considerable difference in your ages, and still more in your experience. She is an unformed girl, and you are a man of the world. May I, in relinquishing her to your care, rely on you to help her to live upon a higher and more elevated plane than she has hitherto done."

Lord Mountcarron does not in the least understand what the general is talking about.

"I should never dream of interfering with my wife's religious principles," he stammers.

"I am not alluding to religion. Her mind is still crude and unformed."

"Oh, you mean books, and all that sort of thing. Well, you know what I intend to settle on her, General Fuller. You are aware that she will never lack money to carry out her ideas, and any lectures or classes she may wish to attend. I know

ladies love to dabble in science and theology now a-days."

"Lord Mountcarron, you quite mistake me. What I mean is, that though we all live in a material world, it is not necessary we should be material ourselves. There is a higher life than the mere round of dancing, dressing and eating, though few consider it. I should have liked to have kept my Gladys at my side for a few years longer, to have directed her thoughts to the advantages of learning this better and higher life. But I suppose it was not to be. It is fated I am to hand her over to your care. Let it be a judicious and a tender one. Don't make her into an entirely worldly woman. Keep the best qualities of her mind for yourself, to enable her to be a faithful wife and companion to you, and an able mother to your children. Don't let her senses run riot. Don't leave her too much to herself. Guide her with a firm hand for her faults, and an indulgent eye for her weaknesses, and I

believe she will ripen into a good and noble woman."

He might just as well have spoken to the table. Lord Mountcarron understands nothing of this speech, except that the general has asked him to be kind and gentle with his daughter. And, naturally, he has no intention of being otherwise.

"You may depend upon me," he answers seriously. "Gladys shall never feel a pain, nor shed a tear, that it is in my power to ward off from her. And now, you must not think me impatient if I ask to see her. We have not met since she honoured me with her acceptance at the Campbells'."

"Certainly, you have every right to see her," replies the general, rising to ring the bell. "Oh, stay—I believe she is in the drawing-room with her mother. I will go and prepare her for your visit."

He leaves him as he speaks, and walks to the drawing-room, where Gladys and Mrs. Fuller are engaged at needlework.

"Lord Mountcarron is here, my dear,"



he says, kissing his daughter, "and wishes to see you. Will you join him in the library, or shall he come here?"

"Let him come to me," says Gladys promptly.

The general glances at his wife.

"Then perhaps, Mary, *we* had better retire."

"Why?" demands Gladys.

"The earl will wish to see you alone, my dear."

"But not without mother! He can have nothing so say to me, that mother is not to hear."

"I had better go, my dear," says Mrs. Fuller.

"Nonsense, mama! keep your seat. I'm not going to have you turned out for anybody. And you too, dad. Bring Mountcarron here yourself. We shall be a nice little family party."

The general goes off, shrugging his shoulders and wondering what *he* should have thought in days gone by, if the papa

and mama had insisted upon being present at his interviews with his lady-love.

He begins to apologise to the earl, but that gentleman cuts him as short as Gladys did.

"My daughter is in the drawing-room. I proposed her joining you here, but——"

"Surely it is *my* part to wait upon Miss Fuller," interposes Mountcarron.

"Yes, only my wife is with her, and Gladys has some scruple about turning her mother out of the room. But if you'll wait few minutes, I'll make some excuse to a demand her presence."

"My dear general! pray do no such thing. I am longing to see Mrs. Fuller, and thank her personally for the interest she has shewn in this affair. I hardly think that without her assistance I should have obtained my wish. Gladys appears quite devoted to her mother."

"Yes, both my girls are good daughters. Come, then, Lord Mountcarron; the ladies must be waiting for us."

He precedes the earl to the drawing-room, and is surprised to see him advance first to Mrs. Fuller, and raise the hand she extends to his lips.

"I consider my thanks are due to *you*, before all," he says, "for the accomplishment of my hopes. I feel that I should have obtained little favour in your daughter's eyes, if *you* had not approved of her choice."

"O! you are *too* good, Lord Mountcarron," replies Mrs. Fuller, blushing and bridling, "though I cannot deny my sentiments towards you, and I should have been very much surprised if Gladys had given you a different answer."

As Lord Mountcarron turns to Gladys, her father watches her with anxious eyes, and is dumbfounded at the cool, airy way in which she greets her lover. Her eyes beam straight into his, her delicate body sways towards him, her lips are parted in a conscious smile—a smile of triumph.

"When you have quite done with mama,"

she says, airily, as she too offers him her hand.

The earl takes it, and without removing his eyes from her face, draws her to him, and kisses her upon the lips. Then she colours just a little. She is not used to embraces from the other sex. But she recovers herself immediately and glances at her father, with a little conscious laugh. What she reads in his face has much more, however, to move her. She rushes—this time eagerly and naturally—across the room, and throws herself into his arms.

"My sweet darling dad," she exclaims, "I shall always be *your* child, whatever I am."

"I hope so, my sweet, I hope so!" the general says, brokenly, as he returns her kisses.

"I trust General Fuller does not think me presumptuous enough to suppose I could ever offer you anything that would stand in competition with his love," says Lord Mountcarron, following her.

"I should think not," retorts Gladys, from the shelter of her father's arms.

"And yet I hope you will let me place the sign and seal even of my humble allegiance upon your finger, Gladys," he continues.

The girl puts her hand behind her, and he slips a ring composed of six enormous brilliants on the fourth finger of her left hand. She looks at it, and whispers, "thank you."

"What exquisite stones!" cries Mrs. Fuller, "they light up the room."

"I may feel now that you are really to be my own?" says Lord Mountcarron.

"Yes," replies Gladys.

"And is it too soon to speak of the time when you will make me happy?"

Gladys looks up in her father's face.

"Since both your parents are present, and have sanctioned our betrothal, I think the opportunity is a fitting one," continues the earl. "I suppose there is no reason for delay. We should all wish to see

the matter settled before the season is over."

"I see no objection," says Mrs. Fuller decidedly.

"It shall be as dad wishes," exclaims Gladys. "He shall decide for me, in that, and everything."

The general looks wearily passive.

"If the marriage *is* to be," he says at last, "there is no reasonable excuse for putting it off. What are your wishes, Mountcarron?"

"This is the third of June, general! I don't think it should take place later than the last week in July."

"Will that date suit you, Gladys?"

"Will it suit, mother?" echoes the girl.

"Certainly my love! I will *make* it suit."

"Very well, then! *I* have no objection."

"Shall we fix it for the 27th of July then?" says Lord Mountcarron. "I think that is the date that will best suit the relations whom I should wish to be present

at my marriage. The other details we shall have plenty of time to decide upon." He takes up his hat then, as if about to go.

"Will you not stay and lunch with us?" demands the general in amazement.

"Thanks! not to-day. Gladys will excuse me. She knows how much my time is occupied. But if I might propose to-morrow——"

"Certainly, whenever you like. Don't wait for an invitation. Remember! our house is open to you henceforward."

"You are too good. I will wait upon you to-morrow then, at one o'clock. And I was about to suggest that if you and Mrs. Fuller and Gladys would do me the honour to allow me to drive you down to Richmond on my drag, we might take a little dinner there together afterwards."

"Oh, yes! *do!* that will be delightful," cries Gladys gleefully, "and I'll sit by my dad and make love to him all the way down."

"But Gladys, remember—" begins General Fuller."

"She is only to remember one thing General," interrupts the earl, "that (as far as I am concerned) she is always to do exactly as she pleases from this time forward."

Then he shakes hands with his intended father and mother in law, and having once more embraced his *fiancée*, bows himself out of the room.

"Now ! isn't he nice ?" asks Gladys, with her head on one side, contemplating her diamonds.

"He is just perfect," replies Mrs. Fuller, "so distinguished and good-looking—such an air of breeding, and so much consideration. I never saw such a man in all my life before. I'm quite in love with him myself."

"I told dad you were," laughs Gladys. "And aren't you coming round to our opinion, father? Don't you think it's rather a feather in your little girl's cap



to make such a great, big, fine marriage for herself?"

"I never doubted its being a 'great, big, fine marriage,' my dear, and if it proves to be a happy one, my best hopes for you will be realised."

"I shall be as happy as the day is long," says the girl confidently. "And do you know, dad, I believe that, with all the spooney, romantic nonsense you've been putting in my head, you've made me quite fall in love with the man. I felt 'thrills' running up and down my back when he kissed me."

"My dear, you should never speak of such a feeling, even if you experience it," says Mrs. Fuller primly.

"It's all dad's fault, mother. He taught me things yesterday I had never heard of before. Didn't you, daddy?"

"You are a wild girl," responds the general, as he puts her off his knee.

Well, it is all settled then. His daughter is to be one of the grandest ladies in the

land, and yet he is not happy about her. As he leaves the room he turns lovingly to her once more. She is gazing at her betrothal ring with eyes as brilliant as the stones.



## CHAPTER IV.

### “THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE.”

THE excitement of spreading the grand news amongst their friends and relations, and of discussing the make, the material, and the cost of the various articles of dress necessary to a countess's trousseau, cause the next few weeks to fly rapidly enough. Each day the beautiful Miss Fuller is seen in public by the side of her betrothed earl—either on the box seat of his four-in-hand, or seated opposite to him in her mother's carriage, or encircled by his arm in the mazes of the waltz—and envious eyes follow her, and envious tongues are heard to wonder what on earth Lord Mountcarron can see in her above other women, that he should

promote her to the position of his wife? Gladys hears it all (at secondhand, if not personally), and enjoys it beyond measure. This is what she is marrying the earl for—this is the harvest quickly gathered of her clever husbandry. Her breast swells with pride as she catches the ill-natured whispers that follow her—her eyes beam with delight as she sees the looks of detraction cast upon her beauty, and she gives herself consequential airs that make her royally hated.

"Never mind, darling," whispers Winnie consolingly, "it is only their malice. They are so jealous of your lovely face, and your splendid marriage, they cannot contain themselves."

"But I *do* mind," replies the embryo countess. "It is meat and drink to me. I wouldn't miss it for all the world. Why, Winnie, what do you suppose I'm marrying him for, if it isn't to make the other girls die of envy?"

Lord Mountcarron meanwhile is as atten-

tive as a *fiancée* can possibly be. He makes his bride elect the most beautiful presents. He dances attendance on her everywhere. Hardly a day passes but some relation or friend of his family leaves a card upon General and Mrs. Fuller. The wedding preparations proceed on a magnificent scale, and Mrs. Fuller declares twenty times a day that she shall die of the fatigue she is undergoing, and she doesn't know what on earth she shall do when it is all over, and her dear girl has gone from her care for ever. The general also sometimes says to himself ruefully, as he draws another cheque for milliners and mantua makers, that he, too, doesn't know what on earth he shall do when it is all over, and he has overdrawn his balance for the remainder of the year. But he is wise enough to keep such vulgar considerations to himself. As Gladys enters the drawing-room one afternoon, from a long shopping expedition with her sister, she sees a basket of the most beautiful roses on the table. The con-

ceited puss has been so overladen with flowers and presents of all sorts lately, that she has become disdainfully indifferent to the offerings laid upon her shrine. She sniffs at them carelessly, and enquires :

"Mountcarron been here, mother?"

"Yes, my dear, and so disappointed to find you were out. He brought us a box for the opera this evening. But it was not he who left the roses for you, Gladys."

"No? Who then?" with a slight degree of interest.

"His cousin, Mr. Brooke, who came with him. Such a handsome young man. Not so dignified and important-looking as the earl, perhaps."

"Not so stout, you mean, mother."

"Now, Gladys, I really think it is very wrong of you to call Mountcarron stout. He is well-covered, as every man should be at his age. You wouldn't like him to be a bag of bones, like Captain Richley?"

"Oh! bother Captain Richley, mother

Go on about the cousin. Was it he who brought me the roses ? ”

“ Yes, dear. He was as disappointed as Mountcarron when he saw only me, and he asked leave so prettily to call again. Of course, I said ‘ yes. ’ He will be your cousin soon, and you ought to know him. And the earl seemed to think a great deal of him. I believe he mentioned that Mr. Brooke is to be his best man on the occasion. ”

“ Brooke — Brooke, ” repeats Gladys thoughtfully. “ I don’t seem to remember the name. Where’s Debrett ? ”

The bible of the aristocracy of England having been found on a side table, she runs rapidly through its pages till she comes to the well-used one which contains the genealogy of the Earls of Mountcarron. .

“ John Edward Henry ( isn’t it a hideous name ? ) Earl of Mountcarron, Viscount Talmage, Baron Trench, ” she says in a breath, and then, after a slight pause : “ Of course, how stupid of me. I wonder I did

not remember it before. I've read it a hundred times, 'Heir Presumptive. The Honourable James Brooke.' That must be the man ; but what business has he to be the heir presumptive, mother ? "

"I don't know, my love. I suppose he is the next male cousin. If the late earl had brothers——"

"I remember now. Mountcarron told me all about it one day ; but there are so many branches in these big families. His father had three brothers ; but they're all dead. The second one never married, and the third had only daughters. This Mr. Brooke must be the son of the fourth. He is much younger than Mountcarron, isn't he, mother ? "

"Oh ! considerably. Not more than two or three and-twenty. And quite a different style. Fair, and a very slight figure. But you're sure to see him before long, and you must make friends with him."

"Naturally," cries Gladys, laughing. "It wouldn't be safe for me to snub the



future Earl of Mountcarron. He might poison us both to get into the title."

"You mustn't talk like that, Gladys. Of course, Mr. Brooke will never be the Earl of Mountcarron, now."

"Why not?"

"Why, because—it is difficult to talk of such things—but naturally we shall all look forward to your giving the earl an heir. It is only what will be expected of you, my dear."

"Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed," misquotes Gladys. "Now don't look shocked, mother. I know perfectly well that when a girl is married to a nobleman, it is her duty to have a son, and if she doesn't, she is voted a fraud. But these things are not entirely under one's own control, and until there is a Viscount Talmage on the scene of life, I shall please myself by looking on Mr. Brooke in the same light as Debrett, as heir presumptive to the earldom. It's quite an interesting relationship when you

come to think of it, and makes me feel motherly towards him already."

Mrs. Fuller does not smile at her daughter's childish remarks. She considers it sacrilegious even to cast a doubt on the prospect of a legitimate heir to the Mountcarrons, and is disposed to be cross with Mr. Brooke for having presumed to make their acquaintance.

"I consider your treatment of this subject as unwomanly and unmaidenly in the extreme, Gladys," she says, as she folds up her work and leaves the room, "and the less you refer to it in the future, the better."

"I wonder what makes her so cross about it?" thinks the girl, as she selects two creamy roses from the basket, and places them in her bosom.

"It was nice of Mr. Brooke at all events to bring me these roses. All the nicer because he must look on me as something of a marplot. I wonder if he will mind not being the earl. I wonder if he will resent it on me, or if he will be as friendly as if

I did not stand between his prospects and himself. Well, at all events I must be very kind to him, and behave just as if I knew nothing at all about it. I wonder if he will like me, spite of all. I wonder if——”

But here her wonderings are interrupted by a summons upstairs, and in another hour she is standing, a very incarnation of loveliness, robed for the Italian Opera.

Mountcarron joins them in the course of the evening, and she tells him how sorry she was to miss him and his cousin that afternoon.

“It is of no consequence,” he replies, “I wanted to introduce Jem to you, because he is to be my groomsman on the 27th, and he has only just returned from Norway. But he will call on you himself another day. He is a nice boy. You will like him, and he has been used to be a good deal at Carronby.”

“Is his father dead?” asks Gladys.

“Yes, both father and mother. His only

near relation beside myself is his sister, Lady Renton, and she is much older than he is. He is my only male cousin, you know."

"Yes! And he is your heir," says Gladys.

"He is the heir presumptive to the title," corrects the earl, "but I trust he will never be any nearer to it."

"I should like to know him. Tell him to call again."

"Oh, he will certainly call again," replies Lord Mountcarron, and in effect the Honourable Mr. Brooke does call again at General Fuller's house, within a very few days.

Gladys is alone when he is ushered into the drawing-room. Her father is at his club, and her mother has started off on a round of calls. In these days Mrs. Fuller is never so happy as when she is giving her friends a description of the glories upon which her daughter is about to enter. It is a very warm afternoon in the beginning

of July, and Gladys is attired in a soft India muslin dress, simply belted round her slender waist.

The heat has called a bright spot of crimson into each of her cheeks. She has pushed her fair hair impatiently off her white forehead. Her large eyes are plaintively dreamy and languid. She might stand as a model for the spirit of youth and love. Who could guess, looking at her, that she has shewn as much cool calculation in choosing her path in life as the most worldly-minded manœuvrer could possibly do?

James Brooke, coming upon her suddenly, is startingly surprised. He cannot believe at first that this is *the* Miss Fuller. It must be a younger sister, some schoolgirl home for the holidays—some half-child, half-woman not yet emancipated from the nursery. He has expected to find a beautiful woman in his cousin's choice. Everybody has contrived to tell him she is so. But he has pictured a fashionable beauty to him-

self—a girl with flashing eyes and coquettish, self-conscious ways, and dressed in a "*confection*" from Worth.

But Gladys Fuller, with all her love of rank and position, and her apparent distaste for sentimentality, is a most childlike and ingenuous-looking beauty, and the way in which she comes forward to greet him is so graceful, whilst it is perfectly self-possessed, that he hardly knows how to stammer forth his apologies for calling again so soon.

"I—I—beg your pardon, but *are* you Miss Fuller? I came—I am Lord Mountcarron's cousin, and——"

"Oh, I have heard all about you, Mr. Brooke, and I have been expecting you to call. Yes, I am Gladys Fuller. I am so sorry my mother is out, and she will be sorry too, but if you will sit down and make yourself comfortable, I daresay she will be home before you go. John" (this to the servant), "Let us have tea here at once."

Still Mr. Brooke stands looking at her.

“Do you think me terribly rude—but I cannot get over my surprise? You are so very different from what I expected you to be.”

“Am I? How funny! What did you expect?”

“I can hardly tell. Mountcarron is not good at description, but I thought you would be a dashing, fashionable sort of professional beauty, you know.”

“What a horrible idea! I hope your mind is relieved! But perhaps you do not think me ‘dashing’ enough for the position?”

This direct allusion to her marriage breaks the ice between them, and they both laugh.

“My surprise is,” continues Mr. Brooke, “that Mountcarron never gave me any idea of what you were like. But as I said before the poor old boy is not good at description.”

"He is not a poetical nature," acquiesces Gladys, pouring out the tea.

"You are right. And it requires a very poetical nature to be able to describe a woman."

"I have not thanked you yet, Mr. Brooke, for the lovely roses you sent me."

"Pray don't mention them. Do you love flowers? But why need I ask? Had I seen you the other day I should have brought you some more without even putting the question."

"Can you guess a person's likes and dislikes, then, from only seeing them?"

"I can judge if they have a nature elevated above the artificial things of this life. I can tell when a woman prefers a flower to a ribbon."

"But don't make a mistake about me, Mr. Brooke! I love ribbons and all the good things of this world—dinners and dances, and money, and everything that is nice."



"Perhaps you have never known anything better, Miss Fuller."

Gladys opens her eyes to their fullest extent.

"What better things could I know?"

"Everything that elevates instead of lowering us."

"But what's the good of these higher things? We can't *live* on them, Mr. Brooke. We must eat and drink and pay our bills. It seems to me that there is no time for anything else in this world."

"Fashionable life certainly does make a cruel demand upon our time and energies," responds the young man, "and gives us nothing worth having in return."

"Oh, don't you think so?" cries Gladys. "I am not half tired of it yet. I love dances and theatres, and pleasure of all sorts, and I wish the days were only twice as long."

"You are still so young," he says, in the tone of excuse one would use towards a child.

The future countess bridles with indignation.

"*Young!* I was nineteen last January. Do you call that young? You can't be much older yourself."

"Oh, yes, I am," he answers, smiling. I am turned three and twenty. And by the time you are my age, I expect you will be as tired of the useless life we lead as I am."

He looks winningly handsome as he speaks to her. His hair, which is only redeemed from being golden by the shades of chesnut brown that fleck it here and there, curls over his head like that of the young Antinous. His eyes, of a tenderer and greyer blue than those of Gladys, have that far away look in them which bespeaks the possession of imagination and ideality; the curves of his mouth betoken a purity and refinement almost feminine, whilst his fine athletic limbs shew that in physical strength and development of muscle he is every inch a man.

Gladys glances at him with interest, and hears him speak with pleasure.

There is a secret something which attracts her to Mr. Brooke as she has seldom been attracted to any stranger, and she begins to think he will be a very nice cousin indeed.

"I suppose you have been to Carronby?" he resumes, after a pause.

"Not yet. Mountcarron has proposed it several times, but we should have to sleep away from home, and our engagements are so numerous just now, we cannot manage it."

"Well, you will have plenty of opportunity to learn to love it hereafter. I suppose you will spend most of your time out of the season there?"

"Is it such a very charming place?"

"It is too charming for any description to do it justice. Mountcarron has never properly appreciated it. He cares nothing for nature, unless it is something he can kill. The country in his opinion was made

for shooting and fishing—nothing else. But Carronby is a dream—situated in the most fertile and wooded part of Sussex. It is a place to live and die in. I hope you will fall in love with it at once, as I did, and spend a lot of your time there."

"You are very enthusiastic, Mr. Brooke. But I don't care much for the country."

"I'll make you care for it. When you have spent one summer at Carronby, you will hate the very thought of London."

Gladys laughs.

"Well, then, you will have to come with me and point out all its beauties. I cannot imagine Mountcarron as a cicerone. His imaginative faculties are not strongly developed."

"Carronby requires no imagination. It speaks for itself. But I shall only be too delighted to be your guide through its lovely woods and meadows. My cousin has been very good in allowing me free access there, and I shall only be too grateful if you don't kick me out."

"Do I look like it?" exclaims the girl.  
"Oh, Mr. Brooke! I am sure I need not tell you how welcome you, or any of Lord Mountcarron's relations, will be under any roof of which I am mistress."

He bows in acknowledgment of the invitation.

"I only hope you may not live to regret your gracious answer. I am a terrible bore, Miss Fuller. When I am at home there is scarcely a day that I don't walk over some part of Carronby. Mountcarron has given me the shooting there during his absence."

"When you are at home? Do you live then near Carronby?"

"Yes. I have a little nest of a place called Nutley, about two miles distant. It's hardly worth calling a place, but it is all I possess.

"And you live there alone?"

"No; pardon me! My sister, Lady Renton, keeps house for me. I hope you will be great friends with my sister, Miss

Fuller. She is the very best woman in the world."

"Is she?" says Gladys. "*The best woman* in the world," has not an inviting sound for her.

"Indeed she is, and I am sure you will like her. She would have called on you before this, but her little boy is ill, and she has been unable to leave him. But she hopes to be present on the 27th."

"She is a widow?"

"Yes, she is a widow, and ten years older than myself. I was always her pet and her baby, and I really think even now that she has little Hugh to look after, she still looks on me as the bigger baby of the two. Her husband and she were great philanthropists, and went heart and soul into their various schemes for the benefit of mankind. They spent their money freely on it too—so freely, that when Sir Edward died, we found that if Hugh was to have anything to live on when he came of age, his mother must retrench during

the interim. So she came to live with me at Nutley, and I don't know what I should do without her. She is just everything to me."

"It is very nice to have a sister whom you can love like that," says Gladys softly. "I have one too, my sister Winifred, who is so much better and wiser in every respect than I am."

"Elinor cannot give up her plans for doing good," continues Mr. Brooke. "She has not so much money for spending on them now, but she devotes all her time to them. She is always working for something or somebody. Her great ambition is to elevate her own sex, and make them independent of the other."

"She must be very good," says Gladys. "Won't you have another cup of tea, Mr. Brooke?"

"No, thank you. Afternoon tea is not a favourite vice of mine. But I have intruded my company on you for an unconscionable time, Miss Fuller. You

must attribute my assurance to the kindness with which you have received me."

"I am very glad to have made your acquaintance," she says, somewhat shyly. "We shall be cousins soon, you know, so we ought to be friends. And, by the way, Lord Mountcarron dines with us this evening—couldn't you come too? I am sure my father and mother will be delighted to see you."

But Mr. Brooke, though he would dearly like to linger in that flowery-scented atmosphere, talking to the fair girl who has positively bewildered him with her beauty, feels that he cannot transgress etiquette to the extent of accepting an invitation to dinner at her hands, and takes his leave with the promise of a speedy return.

Once alone, he feels giddy with surprise. The more he thinks of it, the more unable he is to comprehend how his cousin Mountcarron ever managed to win the heart and hand of such an æthereal, intellectual, spiritual-looking creature as Gladys Fuller.



What spell has he used upon her—upon himself—that she should have consented to pass her life with him? For the Earl of Mountcarron has been somewhat of a butt amongst his relations. As a boy, he was a booby and a bully. As a man, he has developed into a heavy and rather reserved individual, who knows but of two lives—one passed at his club, the other in his preserves.

He has no political, nor literary, nor scientific tastes. He has no conversation beyond the commonplace remarks necessary to pull him through a dance or a dinner. He is what one of his club friends once called him, "A well-fed and well-groomed animal," but beyond that, he is nothing.

Young Brooke cannot understand how such a man ever became sufficiently confidential with such a girl as Gladys Fuller to propose marriage to her. He thinks she is the loveliest creature he has ever seen, with the most graceful manners, the most

winning ways, the most child-like and guileless expression.

He raves about her wherever he goes. He tells Mountcarron he is the luckiest fellow the world ever produced. He talks so openly about her, in fact, that a judicious friend pulls him up one day, and cautions him to be more reticent of what he says concerning his cousin's future wife. And then Mr. Brooke talks less, perhaps, but seeks the Fullers more. He is constantly there. The general and his wife like him, and make him welcome, and Gladys invariably receives him with a smile.

She is almost as fascinated with him as he is with her. His conversation is different from that of other young men, or she fancies that it is so. He is fond of poetry and music, and encourages her to show off the little she can do in that way. She declares he is the most delightful cousin in the world, and that she already looks upon him as a brother. They talk

of Carronby together till Gladys is quite eager to see the place, and they make plans of what they will do when they get there. Mr. Brooke is to go over the old library with her, and decide what modern additions are desirable to it, and introduce her to the authors he most admires. And she is to learn to ride with him. Horsemanship is an accomplishment she has not been able to cultivate in her London life, but she is quite certain she will enjoy it, and Mr. Brooke says hers is just the figure for a riding-habit.

And skating—surely she will wish to learn skating when the winter comes? and there is a pond in the park at Carronby that is reserved for that purpose. In fact, Mr. Brooke talks so eloquently of the beauties and pleasures of the country, that Gladys feels quite sorry to think that the inevitable honeymoon must intervene before she can see her Sussex home.

“And I hate travelling so,” she pouts;  
“one never has time to see anything, and

One's dresses get so terribly crushed in the packing. Why need people have honeymoons? They must be abominably stupid."

"I don't fancy Mountcarron will make it longer than is necessary," says Mr. Brooke, laughing. "He will be miserable if he can't get to the grouse by the twelfth."

"But we *are* to go to the grouse. Don't you know that he's taken a box in the Highlands, and we go straight there from Paris? But fancy how stupid it will be for *me*—Mountcarron out all day, and I left at home with the heather to look at."

"You must get a stout little pony, and go with him."

"I shan't do any such thing. I hate stout little ponies, and guns popping in my ears. Besides, fancy the fatigue. I should prefer moping at home. I wish *you* were coming with us, Mr. Brooke, just to amuse me."

Mr. Brooke turns a shade paler, but laughs nevertheless.

"I don't think that would quite do, although I should enjoy it above all things. No, I shall stay at Nutley, and look forward to your coming home. I do not suppose you will be later than September. And we will have an arch of welcome that you can see a mile off."

"I wish it were September now," replies Gladys. "I shall have nothing to do till I get to Carronby."

Three days after this conversation is the date of her wedding-day.



## CHAPTER V.

### "THE MARRIAGE."

THE 26th of July is naturally a day of bustle and hard work in the Fuller household. The servants do nothing but run up and down stairs, and the ladies of the family, even to Winifred (who has been pressed into the home service for the occasion), deliver orders and countermand them, and send notes flying in every direction, and fuss and fume over the non-arrival of absolutely necessary articles that generally turn up about half-an-hour before the promised time. General Fuller sees scarcely anything of his womankind all day, but about ten o'clock in the evening Gladys glides into the library to wish him good-night. He detains her by the hand.

"You are looking very pale and tired, my dear child," he says affectionately. "You should have been in bed before this."

"It's only ten, dad, dear; and there was so much to do. Poor mother is just fagged out."

"Your mother will have plenty of time to rest when you are gone from us. I can hardly contemplate the idea of losing you yet, my Gladys."

The girl's lips quiver, and she presses them on her father's grey head to still their trembling.

"Don't let us think of it, dad. It is what happens to everybody. We are not worse off than others."

"I hope we are much better off than others," replies the general cheerfully. "It is not every girl that starts in life with such fair prospects as yours, Gladys. But then, too, it is not every father that has such a daughter to lose."

"You think too much of me, dear dad.

You have not seen enough of me. If you knew me as I am, you would be very thankful to get rid of such a nuisance."

The general takes no notice of this remark. He is still holding the delicate little hand, and surveying it thoughtfully.

"Gladys, my darling, you will never cease to look on me as a friend?"

"Oh, father, what a question!"

"Many parents would tell you on entering upon this new life that your husband is your best friend, and it will be your duty to consider him so. And if men and women always realised the hopes with which they enter upon marriage, I suppose it would be so. But so few things turn out as we expect them, Gladys."

"I know it, father."

"Lord Mountcarron may, and I trust he will, prove to be your best friend as well as your husband. But we know little of him as yet. And what I want you to promise me is, that if you ever find your-



self in any trouble, or difficulty, you will come to me."

"Who else should I go to?" murmurs the girl.

"Some very good people say that a wife has no right to speak of her domestic troubles to any one. That if she is unhappy in her married life, she must lock the secret in her own breast, and walk through the world with a smiling face. I can acquiesce in the policy, perhaps, of such a proceeding; but not the morality. I cannot see that a husband is so sacred a being, that his faults are to be covered up past hope of cure, until his wife becomes the passive victim of his misdoings. Don't mistake my meaning Gladys. Marriage *should* be sacred. When a man and woman have such mutual love and sympathy that the wish of the one becomes (only because it is so) the wish of the other, it *is* the most sacred union upon earth. But it is not always so. It is very seldom so. And if she is unhappy or disappointed, a young wife is sure to find

plenty of consolers, and it is safer and better that she should seek advice or consolation in the bosom of her family, rather than in that of strangers."

"Dad! do you think I shall be unhappy in my married life?" says Gladys, softly.

"God forbid, my darling child. But no life is free from troubles, and I am only begging you, when such arise, to remember that you have no truer friends than your father and mother. We shall be very anxious for you, Gladys, but we shall also be very hopeful."

"I don't think I shall be worse off than other girls; I mean as far as my husband is concerned. You see, that is the advantage, father, of not expecting too much of a man. If Mountcarron is ordinarily polite to me, I shall be quite satisfied. He will live his life, I suppose, and I shall live mine. A woman would be very *éxigeante* who required more."

"Then you have never dreamt of being a companion to your husband?"

“How can men and women be companions to each other? Their tastes and pursuits are so different. I don’t think Mountcarron and I have a single idea in common, except dancing, and he says, now, that he only did that to please me. I’m sure I wish he hadn’t. He’s the worst partner I’ve ever had.”

“But there are many planes upon which the sexes may meet, my dear, quite apart from their general idiosyncracies. In the Arts and Sciences, the discussion of the ordinary topics of the day, a woman’s mind is not only equal to the man’s, but far above it. She can lead him to the contemplation and the practice of higher things. A man like Mountcarron, who has spent his life amongst bachelors and worldly amusements, requires to be educated in order to enjoy and appreciate the society of a woman like yourself. It should be your part to do this—to elevate his mind and make him cultivate a purer and more refined life than he has been in the habit of living.”

"O! really, dad, now you ask too much. I expect it will be as much as I can do to endure Mountcarron as he is, without educating him up to my standard. Besides, to tell you the truth, I don't think the game would be worth the candle, and I would much rather he kept to his bachelors and their amusements. If he were like his cousin, Mr. Brooke, it might be different."

"My dear, you must not get into the habit of comparing your husband with other men. It is a fatal mistake. Once married to him, you know, you cannot get rid of him. But you may raise him. All good and pure women have the power to do that for all men."

"I am sure *you* never wanted any raising," says Gladys coaxingly, as she tries to evade the subject. "I shall never find another man in all the world like you, my darling dad."

"You will never find a truer friend, my dearest child," replies the general in a

faltering voice, "nor one who loves you more."

"I will not leave you," cries Gladys suddenly and passionately, throwing herself into his arms. "Only say the word, my darling, and I will never marry anyone, but stay with you and be your '*old maid*' daughter to my life's end."

The general, blinking the tears from his eyes, caresses and fondles her till she is herself again.

"My '*old maid*' daughter," he repeats proudly. "Yes! you look very much as if the men would let you remain an '*old maid*,' don't you? Why if you were to give up Mountcarron to-morrow, I should have half-a-dozen buzzing round you the day after. No! my dear little girl. You know that is all nonsense. You would not give up this marriage, even if you could. Neither would I wish it. I have already learned to think of you as the Countess of Mountcarron."

At that name Gladys dries her eyes.

"What a commotion there would be if I *were* to throw him over. Yes, father! you are right. It is too late to draw back, and the sooner it is over now the better."

"And the sooner you are in bed, my dear, the better. So, kiss me once more and go. You have only one thing to do, my Gladys—your duty as it lies before you. You are quite clever enough to recognise it, and it lies with yourself to be happy or not."

Gladys slips off to bed with the tears hardly dry upon her lashes. She is quite ready to cry at the idea of leaving her father, but she doesn't much relish this talk about duty. She is marrying for amusement, and a position in society, and lots of money. She has no intention of turning schoolmistress in order to educate Mountcarron up to her ideas. If he is not bearable to her with his own, he may keep them to himself. She relates her conversation with her father to Winnie (who is passing the night at her old home), as she prepares for bed. She has recovered

her spirits by this time, and gives General Fuller's advice many a ridiculous little twist and turn, that make it appear quite comical.

Winnie's big eyes open with surprise.

"What *can* papa mean?" she says incredulously. "Why, Gladys, the earl is perfectly well mannered. I never saw a man behave better in society. And as for his bachelor stories and amusements, gentlemen never introduce such things into their family circles, and we have nothing to do with what they say or do when they are away from us. Really, dear papa is very queer sometimes, and has the funniest old notions."

"Well, never mind him now, dear," says Gladys, jumping into bed. "Do let us get to sleep, for goodness' sake, or my eyes will be screwed up like two pin pricks to-morrow morning."

But her fears are groundless. She never looked prettier than she does upon her wedding day, and when her father, waiting

in the hall, sees her coming down the stairs robed in her white lace and orange blossoms to meet him, his heart gives a big throb of regret to think he has to give away this lovely thing which is so much his own, to a man of whom he knows comparatively nothing.

Lord Mountcarron meanwhile, looking the very pink of fashion, is waiting upon the altar steps to receive her, and nervously buttoning and unbuttoning his grey kid gloves.

The church is crowded with spectators, who whisper to one another that the dark, stoutish gentleman is the bridegroom himself, the Earl of Mountcarron, and that the fair-haired, handsome young fellow beside him is the Honourable Mr. Brooke, his groomsman. Some of the ladies say that Mr. Brooke seems the more nervous of the two, and declare his face flushes every time that the sound of carriage wheels announce a fresh arrival, but that must be their imagination. There are six bridesmaids,



and six groomsmen, amongst whom figure the three "cubs," Gerald, Mark and Leonard, all giggling at the unusual publicity they are undergoing, and all unable to draw on their gloves without splitting them, whilst their mother, who is a monument of coffee colour and old gold, shakes her head reprovably at each fresh outburst on their part.

At last the bride appears on her father's arm, and walks slowly up the aisle. The women, naturally, don't think she is pretty. Her hair is too light, her nose is too long, her figure is too thin and undeveloped. But the future countess walks through their ranks like a queen, and cares nothing for their comments. She places her hand in that of her bridegroom as if she were conferring a patent of nobility on him, and takes her place beside him at the altar as if she had been married half-a-dozen times already.

In ten minutes the whole business is concluded. Before the dear old general has

been able, with his trembling fingers, to find the marriage service in his prayer book, his child is the Countess of Mountcarron, and is holding up her quivering mouth to his for a kiss. Then Mountcarron hurries her and the principal witnesses off to the vestry, and the organist pulls out the stops for the "Wedding March."

The Honourable Mr. Brooke is called upon to sign his name as one of the witnesses to the marriage.

"You have not claimed your privilege yet as best man, Jem," says the earl, laughing. "Don't you know that it's your right to salute the bride?"

Gladys looks up smiling. It is all the same to her if Mr. Brooke kisses her or not. But her new cousin draws back, murmuring something about silly vulgar customs.

"And won't you do it, then?" she asks, drawing aside her veil, and looking up at him with her violet eyes.

Mr. Brooke turns pale, very pale, and advancing his face to hers, just brushes her cheek with his moustache.

"Do you call *that* a kiss?" cries the new countess merrily; and the earl says that Jem is bashful, and not used to kissing ladies, but he dares to say he will improve in time.

Then he draws Gladys' hand within his arm and leads her down the aisle. The organ bursts forth as they issue from the vestry door, and the people stand up and stare them well out of countenance as they walk to their carriage.

Mountcarron hands Gladys in, and then throws himself down beside her, crushing her flowing draperies.

"Well, thank God, *that's* over," he exclaims fervently.

"Yes, only you're tearing my veil. Would you mind moving a little?" says Gladys.

"What a bore it is to be stared at in that way, isn't it? I can't think how all

those people got into the church. I cautioned everybody concerned to keep it as private as possible. Did you mind it much?"

"O, no! one is used to it in society. It is not so bad, after all, as going to a Drawing-Room."

"Ah, that will be the next nuisance. But, thank goodness, not till the spring. I hope your father won't keep us too long over the breakfast. I should like to get away by the 3 o'clock train."

"You have only to tell dad so, and he will manage it for us. How horrible it is to find oneself arrayed in a dress like this, at twelve o'clock in the morning. I shall be so glad to get it off and put on decent clothes."

"So shall I. By the way, my darling, you haven't given me a kiss yet. Am I to be the only one not to salute Lady Mountcarron?"

She turns her fair face to him in the most complacent manner, and permits him to embrace her at his will. But she is con-

scious of a decided sensation of relief when the operation is over.

The breakfast passes off as well as such things usually do, and by two o'clock Lady Mountcarron is attired in her travelling costume and ready to follow her lord to the ends of the earth. The party has broken up into groups standing about the reception-rooms. Gladys approaches James Brooke, half hidden by the curtains of a bay-window.

"We are going now, Mr. Brooke," she says, lightly, "but I shall never be satisfied till I have got Mountcarron to Carronby. But how pale you are looking! Are you ill?"

"I have a headache; the bad effects of getting up so early," he says, with an uneasy laugh.

"Poor boy!" laying her hand on his forehead. "Can't I do anything for you?"

"Nothing, thanks, Lady Mountcarron."

"Oh, you mustn't call me *that*. I am your cousin now, you know, and you must

call me 'Gladys.' You won't forget the big arch of flowers that is to welcome me to Carronby."

"I shall forget—*nothing*, Gladys."

"That is right. Neither shall I. And I shall go for a walk with you through the woods the very first day I get home. I am so sorry your sister could not be with us to-day."

"So am I. But Hugh is still too ill to be left. Besides, his disease is infectious, and the doctor forbade her to come. But I hope all will be right at Nutley by the time you return."

"I hope so, too. Good-bye, then, Mr. Brooke."

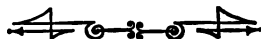
She holds out her hand to him. He raises it to his lips.

"Good-bye ! May every good thing be yours."

"And yours, too. We will share them together," she says, smiling, as she turns from him to her own people.

In a few more minutes she is gone. The

beautiful new carriage, with the coronet on its panels, and its thoroughbred horses, drives off to the London, Chatham and Dover station. Mrs. Fuller and Winnie throw showers of rice and old satin slippers after it—the general watches it till it is out of sight, with anxious, misty eyes—and the Honourable James Brooke stands where she left him, in the bay-window, biting his lips and stamping down some rebellious feeling in his heart, whilst he wishes—just for the moment—that he had never been born.



## CHAPTER VI.

### “ COMING HOME.”

WHILST Gladys is on her wedding tour, the time is passed by her family in various ways. Winnie goes to the seaside with her little son, where she finds it excessively dull, her only diversion being the periodical visits of her husband from Saturday to Monday, which he employs by grumbling incessantly at the rooms, the cooking and the attendance. General and Mrs. Fuller seize the opportunity to pay a long-deferred visit to some stupid relations in Cornwall. But the parental purse has been somewhat drained by the exigencies of the fashionable wedding and they find it convenient to retrench for a few weeks. But they hear continually



from the newly-made countess. She is not a girl who cares in general for letter writing, but she has a keen sense of the ridiculous, that makes her correspondence always acceptable. She writes in the best of spirits, taking off every one she comes in contact with, from the *garçon* who answers her bell, to Lord Mountcarron himself, and presents their foibles in the most ludicrous light. But from Scotland her energy seems to flag, and her letters become more sober. She finds the celebrated moors "flat, stale and unprofitable." She says she is longing to see her dad again, and to begin her woodland rambles, and assume the direction of her own household.

In one letter she asserts that she never could have imagined married life to be so thoroughly uninteresting. Her husband is absent almost all day, shooting, and she is left alone, to consider what dress she shall wear at dinner, and to put it on for no one to notice or admire, except the uncouth

Scottish servants, who call her "me leddy."

She advises her dear old dad, most seriously, to go any where but to the moors for his honeymoon, next time he is married. And she winds up each letter with a joyful peroration to the effect that they will be at Carronby by the first of October, and that so many more days are knocked off her term of penance.

At last their advent is announced for the following week. It has been an old engagement that General and Mrs. Fuller are to meet them there, and Lord Mountcarron has invited his cousins, Lady Renton and Mr. Brooke.

Mr. and Mrs. Prendergast were also included amongst the guests, but Winnie significantly writes to her sister that (as perhaps she knows by this time) a married woman must do what she *can*, and not what she *likes*, and Maurice has decided she had better stay at home. But Gladys is too happy at the thought of meeting her

father and mother again to care much for Winnie's absence.

She becomes so excited as their train approaches the station, that Lord Mountcarron can hardly keep her in her seat until the carriages have come to a standstill at the platform.

"There they are !—there they are !" she exclaims hysterically, as she catches sight of the dear, familiar faces, and as soon as the door is opened, she springs into the general's arms and kisses him effusively, regardless of who may see her.

They hurry her away to the carriage in waiting for her, and then she perceives that an elegant-looking woman, with a fair, placid face, with whom her husband is warmly shaking hands, is also one of the party.

"Gladys, this is my cousin, Lady Renton," says Lord Mountcarron, and in another minute she has made the acquaintance of Mr. Brooke's sister.

"Where is Mr. Brooke ? Is he not at

Carronby? Why did he not come with you?" she asks, eagerly.

"I wished him to be of the party, Lady Mountcarron," replies Lady Renton, smiling; "but I think he has some important work on hand. The completion, or erection, of a triumphal arch, under which you are to drive to your new home, and which has occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of everything else for some days past."

"Oh! how good of him to remember it. Yes, he promised me I should have an arch of welcome when I came to Carronby. And hark! are not those the church-bells ringing?"

"Yes, we had a man on horseback waiting here to ride back and give them notice as soon as ever the train was signalled. You did not think you would be allowed to creep into Carronby unnoticed, did you, Lady Mountcarron? Why, the road is lined with your husband's tenantry for half-a-mile beyond the park gates."

Gladys turns a flushed and smiling face to her father.

"Isn't it nice of them, dad dear? Isn't it delightful to come home this way? And now, how are we to enter Carronby? I *must* drive with you. I must have your hand in mine all the time."

"But, my love, it is impossible. It is imperative that you should sit beside the earl."

"Well, then, you must take the back seat, dad, and mother and Lady Renton shall occupy the other carriage."

"Would it not be more suitable for Mrs. Fuller to go with us?" whispers Mountcarron, "and for the general to escort Lady Renton?"

"Most certainly," acquiesces General Fuller.

"Then I shan't go at all," says Lady Mountcarron, pouting. "If I can't drive with my dad, I shall stay here."

"What are we to do with this wilful child, general?" asks the earl, smiling.

"I really don't know. I'm ashamed of my share in her. *You* must decide for us, Mountcarron."

"Then I decide that, for this day at least, she must have her own way. It is awkward not having another gentleman. Brooke should have been here; but the ladies must excuse the apparent discourtesy."

"I shan't give up my dad," reiterates Gladys like a spoiled child.

And so Lord Mountcarron places her by her father's side on the front seat, and takes the back one himself as quietly as if he had been in harness for a dozen years.

It is a couple of miles from the station to Carronby House, and General Fuller has leisure during the drive to observe his daughter's looks. Her face is animated, sparkling, radiant. Her complexion somewhat tanned from the exposure she has undergone, her figure more rounded though not less graceful. In fact, she

appears well, happy, and full of energy. What could the proudest father desire more? The general cannot help expressing his gratification.

"You have evidently taken good care of my treasure, Mountcarron," he says warmly. "I don't think I ever saw her looking so well."

"Yes, the air of Scotland agreed with her famously, so did the fare. She developed quite an appetite upon the moors."

"There was nothing else to do," interposes Gladys. "I couldn't kill the grouse, so I had to eat them. It was my only satisfaction. How I longed for you, dad."

"You silly child, I am sure you did no such thing."

"If she didn't she must be an inveterate story-teller, general, for she reminded me of it every day."

"Of course I did. I wanted some one to sit with me and amuse me. One thing I

have made up my mind about. Nothing on earth shall ever tempt me to go on those stupid moors again."

"Not till you're married for the second time," says the earl.

"Not even then. I've had enough of them to last me a lifetime. Oh, father! Look! Look! Isn't that the arch—with all those flags flying? Of course it is. And see the '*Welcome*' on it, all in red and white flowers. What flowers are they? It is too late for roses. They must be dahlias. Oh, how pretty it is. How good of Mr. Brooke. He has done it all *for me*! And look at the people! Why, there must be hundreds of them standing in a line along the road. They are waving their handkerchiefs and cheering. Mountcarron, do you hear them cheering? Oh, I *am* so happy! I feel as if I should cry."

She is standing up in the carriage, flushed like a child with pleasure, and talking at the pitch of her voice. Her husband and father have difficulty in making her sit



down and receive the congratulations of the tenantry in a sufficiently dignified manner.

Their cries of "Long live the earl and countess!" "Welcome Lord and Lady Mountcarron!" "God bless the Mountcarrons of Carronby!" ring in her ears like so many blasts of triumph for the position she has attained.

For the first time she realises what it is to be Countess of Mountcarron—feels what she has done for herself—hears with her own ears the elevation she has achieved.

Gladys' cheeks glow, her eyes sparkle, her heart beats so fast she thinks it will suffocate her. She hardly sees the people who wave their hands and curtsy as the carriage passes through their ranks. She bows mechanically on either side, but her limbs tremble, and her sight is dim. Her father has never seen her so powerfully affected by anything in her life before. He attributes her emotion to her pride and happiness in being Lord Mountcarron's

wife, whereas she thinks no more of the man sitting opposite to her than if he had been one of her tenants. He is only the means by which she has risen—the step to the open door. For this reason she would not lose him for all the world. But her agitation is due only to the fact of finding where she stands—of recognising her power—of proving what she has gained by her marriage with an earl.

As the carriage rolls under the wonderful arch of flowers, she is too overcome even to notice it; and when her father lifts her out under the portico of Carronby House, she is silent, as much from awe, as from the excitement she has passed through.

As she reaches the ground, her husband gives her his arm, and leads her into an ancestral hall, lined with dark oak and covered with armour and family portraits, and through a double file of servants, to whom he presents her as the Countess of Mountcarron, into a drawing-room which

has been newly-decorated for her reception. Here they are soon joined by the general and Mrs. Fuller and Lady Renton, and Gladys gives vent to her overwrought feelings by falling into her mother's arms and bursting into tears.

"There, there, my dear child! You mustn't cry on first entering your home. It isn't lucky. But you will excuse her, will you not, Mountcarron? I fancy she must be over-tired."

"No, no!" sobs Gladys, "but I am—*I am so happy!*"

The earl is pleased with the compliment. What man in love with a woman would not be? He goes up to his wife and kissing her, says:

"Welcome, my dearest girl, to Carronby. We can all understand what you feel, and if your mother will be so good as to conduct you to your own rooms and order you some tea, you will be all right after a little quiet."

Mrs. Fuller acting on this hint leads her

daughter upstairs, while the rest of the party smile significantly at each other at the idea of the loving inexperienced young girl being so overcome with happiness as to be unable to find relief except in tears.

Gladys, in the cool solitude of her pretty apartments, soon recovers herself.

"Oh, mother, dear, how silly I am, but it seemed to come on me with such a burst, the welcome of the people, and the grandeur of this place, and the ease and comfort with which I shall be surrounded for the rest of my life, that I really couldn't help it. It was too much for me."

"My dearest child, I can quite understand it, and make every allowance. You have achieved a most splendid position for yourself, and it is quite natural that the knowledge should seem almost too much for you at first. But you will soon get used to it, and feel more at home here than in Cardigan Place."

"Just look at at that park! Look at

those trees! They must be hundreds of years old," says Gladys, walking to the window. "And see the deer. Oh, the lovely creatures! And the miles and miles around of wood and water. What an exquisite place! Mr. Brooke was right when he told me Carronby was like a dream. And this is the marriage, mother, that dad would have had me give up because his idea of love differs from mine!"

"Oh, my dear, never speak of it again. Never *think* of it. It is indeed well for you that I have never allowed your father to interfere with my plans for my children. The idea of refusing an earl and a place like this. It was perfectly monstrous! But he sees his folly now, I'll be bound."

"Yes, he looked pleased and proud enough as we drove from the station, dear old thing!—as well he might. Oh, I had such trouble to prevent myself crying with excitement in the carriage. Wasn't it

grand to hear those men and women shout? And they're all our tenantry, mother, everyone of them."

"My dear, you will reign here like a little queen. Your fortune is made for life. I never was so proud of any one of my children before."

"Well, poor Winnie hasn't done much to be proud of, has she? Of course, Maurice can give her every comfort, but I think, where people have not enough money to get away from one another, marriage must always be a mistake. Then as for the cubs, mother, I don't know if your ambition for them extends to heiresses," laughing, "but if so, you really must take them in hand, and polish them up a bit. Mark and Leonard are the rudest boys I ever saw in my life."

"Ah, my dear, boys are not worth the trouble we bestow on girls. If they should marry ladies of title, what then? It doesn't advance their position an inch. They always remain as they are born,

and they must learn to look after themselves."

"*Some* boys never seem to need polishing," remarks Gladys, thoughtfully. "By-the-way, mother, dear, have you seen Mr. Brooke?"

"Yes. He was at dinner yesterday, but to-day I believe he has been occupied with your arch."

Gladys' eyes sparkle.

"Wasn't it good of him to take so much trouble for me? Oh, I think he is so nice and kind. I hope I shall see him this evening, that I may thank him for keeping his promise."

"He is staying here with Lady Renton, though their own place is only a mile or so distant. Your father walked over to it yesterday with the young man, and he tells me it is the prettiest little nook imaginable."

"I shall get Mr. Brooke to take me over there to-morrow. I am longing to see Nutley," says Gladys.

"Don't you think you had better make the acquaintance of your own property first, my dear? And Lady Renton is here too, you see. She would be a more suitable cicerone for you than Mr. Brooke."

"Oh, I shall never like Lady Renton as much as her brother. By-the-way, mother, what sort of a woman is she? Very goody-goody and prim?"

"She is not prim at all, but I hear she is very good, and she seems to have great influence over Mr. Brooke. She speaks to him more as if she were his mother than his sister."

"Interfering, I suppose? Well, I shan't let her interfere with me. I don't know that I quite like the look of her face. She is not a bit like him."

The conversation is interrupted at this juncture by a tap at the door, and the very person they have been discussing appears on the threshold.

"May I come in, Lady Mountcarron?"



Can I be of any use? I am afraid the long railroad journey and this warm day has over-tired you."

"I *did* feel tired, but I am better now, thank you. I have hardly had time to say a word to you yet, Lady Renton, and I have heard so much of you from Mr. Brooke."

Lady Renton smiles.

"Does my wild Jemmie really find time to say anything of his old sister during the gaieties of a London life? I hardly thought so. I am afraid he must have had very little of interest to tell you."

"Oh, yes, indeed. I heard all about Nutley and little Hugh, and yourself, until I became quite anxious to make your acquaintance."

"I am glad to hear it, for since we are near neighbours, we are likely to see a great deal of each other. Jemmie seems to be a good hand at description. He wrote me so fully about *you*, that I should have recognised you anywhere."

"Has Mr. Brooke returned to Carronby yet?" asks Gladys, rather shyly.

"No, and I do not expect to see him till dinner time. He had some minor duties, such as looking after the tenants' dinners and bell-ringers' fees, to attend to on behalf of his cousin, which may detain him for the afternoon."

"Mountcarron thinks a great deal of Mr. Brooke," says Gladys.

"They are the only two male cousins, you know, and though there is such a difference in their ages, the fact always drew them together. We had another brother, but he died some years ago."

"And Mr. Brooke is the presumptive heir to the earldom," remarks Gladys, notwithstanding a glance of caution from her mother.

"He has never looked on himself in that light," replies Lady Renton gravely. "We have always hoped and expected that Mountcarron would marry, and carry on the family in the direct line. It was so

unfortunate that all the brothers should be taken from us. But the old countess, our grandmother, was consumptive, and they inherited a tendency to the disease."

"Mr. Brooke is not consumptive, is he?" asks Gladys, with sudden interest.

Lady Renton smiles at her anxiety.

"No, nor the earl either. You need have no fear on their account, Lady Mountcarron. I do not think they have the least symptoms of weak lungs. If you had heard Jemmie shouting to the workmen this morning, you would have absolved *him* of the suspicion at all events."

"And Mountcarron does not look in delicate health, certainly," replies Gladys, laughing. "Someone guessed him to forty, the other day, because he is so fat. I think he looks older than my dad."

"My dear child, what an extraordinary idea!" exclaims Mrs. Fuller.

"Do you think so, mother? But you don't know how lazy he is, nor how much

he eats. Why his back is three times the breadth of father's."

"Don't you think we had better go downstairs now, if you feel quite restored!" suggests Mrs. Fuller, who fears that her daughter is not prudent in talking so openly before Lady Renton.



## CHAPTER VII.

### AN EXPLANATION.

G LADYS does not, as Lady Renton prophesied, meet Mr. Brooke until the family assembles for dinner. She perceives him then, standing in the shade of the drawing-room, attired in his evening suit and looking so exactly as he used to do in the days before her marriage, when he spent half his time at her father's house, that she rushes up to him effusively, and holds out her hand.

“Ah! how do you do? I have been longing to see you, and thank you for my lovely arch. It is magnificent. I had no idea it would be so high, nor such a mass of flowers.”

“You must thank the people of Carronby,

rather than me, Lady Mountcarron," he says, as he holds her hand for an instant, and drops it again. "There was hardly a cottager who did not strip his little garden to contribute flowers for the arch, and all the men worked at its erection with a good will. I merely directed their efforts."

"But they never would have done it without you?"

"I think they would. Brides and bridegrooms, of any importance, usually have a triumphal arch to welcome them home. It is a very common custom."

Gladys does not like this way of looking at the compliment paid her. She would rather think it entirely her own, and given from the hands of Mr. Brooke. She turns away from him only half-satisfied.

"Well, you always talked of it as *your* arch in London, so, of course, I thought it was raised entirely at your suggestion," she answers slowly.

"And so it was, Lady Mountcarron," interposes Lady Renton; "Jemmie is

modest, and does not like to take the *kūdos* of it to himself; but I can assure you that, if the tenantry had thought of and erected an arch by themselves, it would have been a very different sort of affair from this. I must give my brother more credit for it than he is inclined to take."

"I thought as much," says Gladys gratified.

"I cannot see the thing in the same light," says Mr. Brooke indifferently, as he turns to speak to his cousin.

Gladys is hurt—she cannot tell why—but even in these first moments of reunion she perceives a difference in the manner of Mr. Brooke towards herself, and she is puzzled to guess the cause. After dinner it is the same. She goes to the piano and sings a ballad. He does not follow her, as he was wont to do in London, and lean over the instrument and turn the pages of the music, but remains at the further end of the apartment, talking to General Fuller or reading the newspaper. She goes to bed dissatis-

fied, but with the inward conviction that the next morning she will have an explanation with him and learn the reason of the change. She will challenge him to a walk through the woods of Carronby, and politeness will forbid his refusing her. But, for the next morning, Lord Mountcarron has planned a slaughter of the partridges, and the three gentlemen of the party appear at breakfast, attired in shooting coats and knickerbockers, ready for the fray.

"And are you going to leave us all alone on the very first day I arrive at Carronby?" cries Gladys, with comical dismay.

"No such thing," replies her husband, who is eminently practical, "we are going to leave you with your mother and Elinor. You ladies can amuse yourselves by taking a nice drive round the country, and we will tell you all our adventures at dinner-time."

The "nice drive," however, does not prove to be very exciting, although Lady Renton is an interesting companion, and



has a great deal to tell them of her work amongst the women of the lower classes, in helping to make them independent of marriage and the assistance of that sex which usually shows its powers of protection by brutality and ill-usage. But Gladys cares nothing for the women of the lower classes, and feels intolerably bored. She asks suddenly, in the middle of their drive, if they cannot make a call at Nutley. Lady Renton is surprised at her interest in the place, but is pleased to gratify it. She is anxious herself to ascertain how her little boy is getting on without her. So the horses' heads are turned, and the party proceed in the opposite direction. Nutley is a charming, old-fashioned cottage—long, low, and rambling, covered with vines and creepers, and set in the midst of a lovely garden.

Gladys is enchanted with every part of it. She is even ready to admire, and make friends with, little Hugh Renton, a sturdy boy of seven or eight years old,

and insists (to the delight of his mother) on carrying him back to Carronby, whilst Mrs. Fuller, who has considered her daughter's dislike to children proverbial, looks on in silent amazement. But though Nutley and little Hugh form excellent topics of conversation that evening with which to allure Mr. Brooke to return to his former allegiance, they have not the power to draw him out of his shell; and Lady Mountcarron is still further puzzled. The next morning she thinks she has trapped him. There is to be no shooting that day, and the sun is shining brightly, and Mountcarron has an appointment with his bailiff which will keep him employed until luncheon time.

"Then I shall explore the park and woods," exclaims Gladys gaily, "and Mr. Brooke shall be my cavalier. You promised to show me all the beauties of Carronby, remember, when we were in London, and I have looked forward so much to becoming acquainted with them."

"No one could point them out to you better than Jem," says her husband, "for he knows every stick and stone upon the place. You must take her to Moonlight Dell, Jem, and the lover's seat, and the haunt of the red deer. Gladys is just of your mind in such matters. She can fall into rhapsodies over wood and water.

"I am sure I should be very happy," stammers Mr. Brooke; "but——"

"Are you engaged?" demands Gladys, imperiously.

"No!—but—Elinor, what are you going to do this morning?"

"Nothing in particular, Jemmie. I am at your service, if you want me."

"Oh! that will be all right, then. We can make a party, and explore the woods together. Take Hugh with you, Elinor. I promised the little chap a run."

"Hugh will be delighted. How soon shall we start, Lady Mountcarron?"

"I don't care. Whenever it suits you best. I suppose it will not take us long?"

"My dear, you might walk for days through Carronby woods, and not see all their beauties. But we must not tire you. Perhaps you do not care for walking."

"I can't say that I do much. But it is quite imperative I should become acquainted with my husband's property. So I will join you in the hall in half-an-hour."

She is not in a very good humour when they meet again. She cannot understand Mr. Brooke's evident disinclination to take a ramble alone with her, and her vanity is wounded.

Nothing goes quite right with Lady Mountcarron that morning. The sun is too hot, the grass in the shade too damp, the brambles in the woodland paths catch and tear her dress, and she is afraid of the red deer.

Moonlight Dell is a charming spot in the centre of the park, where a rapid declivity leads to a piece of water, fringed with bull-rushes and purple and yellow flags, and

bearing white, waxen water lilies on its motionless breast.

Standing by it the ground on either side rises high enough to screen the house and outbuildings, and it is overshadowed by some of the finest trees on the estate of Carronby.

"It well deserves its name," remarks Lady Renton, "for nothing can look more fairy-like and beautiful than it does, under the light of the moon. You have often seen it so, have you not, Jemmie?"

"Yes! years ago, before the world had robbed my nature of the small spark of romance it once possessed. I used to come here on summer evenings, and try and compose poetry."

"And have you no romance left in you, Mr. Brooke?" asks Gladys.

"I am afraid not, Lady Mountcarron. Life is too practical and disenchanting. Come, Hughie! I'll race you up one side of the dell and down the other for a penny-worth of brandy balls."

He runs off, followed by his little nephew, and Gladys gazes gloomily at the pool of water-lilies, and sighs.

"It is a sad-looking spot," she says, as she turns away. "It gives me the horrors. I could fancy that people had drowned themselves here."

"It never struck me in that light," replies her companion. "It seems such a peaceful, untroubled sheet of water—like the unexpected rest one sometimes gains in the midst of the battle of life. But is not *this* a pretty little stream, Lady Mountcarron," pointing to a tiny narrow rivulet, the sides of which are planted with ferns, forget-me-nots, and mugwort. "This was our old grandmother's especial favourite, and those flowers were planted by her hand. Wherever she spied a pretty fern or water plant, whether near the house or far from it, she could not rest till she had procured a root to bring home and set by 'grandmother's ditch,' as it used to be called. The old lady dearly loved flowers, and I think I

have inherited her taste. I could not live without them. But you look tired. Are we going too far?"

"I *am* tired," confesses Gladys, "and I should like to return home. I am not used to such long rambles." And when she reaches the house, she walks straight up to her boudoir, and does not appear again till lunch is on the table. And then she confines her conversation entirely to her mother and Lady Renton. She is angry with Mr. Brooke and his evident avoidance of her company.

What has she done that he should let everyone see that he does not care to walk or talk to her? And after all the professions he made in London too, and all his fine promises to be her friend. It is too annoying. But the change in Mr. Brooke is only apparent to herself. Neither the Fullers, nor his sister, nor cousin, perceive anything strange in his manner or mode of address. He is all courtesy and attention to his hostess, as a gentleman staying in the

house should be, and they are completely ignorant that anything is wrong. General and Mrs. Fuller have arranged to return to London in a fortnight, and Lady Renton has decided that her party shall leave Carronby House at the same time.

A day or two before their departure, Gladys comes unexpectedly upon Mr. Brooke in the garden. He is half-asleep, lying full length on a bench under the shade of a huge mulberry-tree, and she has gone there with the intention of picking up some of the fruit. As soon as he sees her, he jumps up, and prepares to beat a retreat.

"I should think you might offer to bring me a basket to put these mulberries in, Mr. Brooke. See! how they are staining my fingers."

"I will, of course, if you desire it, Lady Mountcarron. Where shall I find a basket?"

"There are several in the hall. Now be quick, and bring it back yourself."



He does as she bids him, and as he holds it by the handle for her to drop the fruit in she detains it with her other hand, and looks up in his face.

“Why are you so changed to me?”

At this direct question he turns scarlet.

“Changed—changed,” he stammered ;  
“in what way?”

“Oh! you know well enough. You needn’t profess ignorance. You are not a bit the same as you were when we met in London.”

“You were not married then,” he answers awkwardly.

“What difference does that make? I was engaged to be married! Besides, then you were not my cousin, and now you are.”

“What do you want me to do? Where have I failed?”

“In everything! I can see that you don’t care about me any longer, as you used to do. You never come near me when I am singing or sitting by myself—and

you never say anything nice to me. I believe you hate me!"

"Oh! Lady Mountcarron! how very, *very* mistaken you are!"

"There again! You always call me 'Lady Mountcarron,' when you promised to call me 'Gladys.'"

"But if my cousin should object ——?"

"Why should he object? He calls Lady Renton 'Elinor,' and she is only his cousin, as I am yours."

"She is his *own* cousin, and we are only cousins by marriage."

"Oh! I don't wish to force you to call me 'Gladys' against your will. We can be 'Lady Mountcarron' and 'Mr. Brooke' to each other to our lives' end. Only you should not have made such fine promises if you never intended to perform them."

The young man looks infinitely distressed. The blue veins have started out on his fair forehead—his eyes are downcast—his lips are twitching nervously.

"If you only knew"—he says hesitatingly—"if I might only tell you——"

"I know more than enough already," persists his tormentor. "I know that you promised to take me long walks, and teach me botany—and inoculate me with a love for Nature—and I was to learn! riding, and skating, and a heap of things."

"We can't skate when there's no ice to skate on," he murmurs tamely.

Gladys turns from him with sovereign contempt.

"If you are going to try and cover your rudeness by talking nonsense," she answers grandly, "there is an end of it, once and for ever," and she walks away for a few paces.

"Lady Mountcarron—Gladys!" utters an imploring voice behind her.

"What is it, Jemmie?" she says with an arch look.

"Forgive me! I never dreamt you would interpret my reticence in such a

way? But—cannot you understand? You have only just come home—and your own people are here—and I thought they might think it presumptuous—I was afraid remarks might be made—if I monopolised you so soon."

"Is that the truth?" she says, smiling.

"It is indeed the truth. God knows, I have not acted of my own free will," he answers, with a sigh.

"Then I will forgive you; that is on condition that you amend, and prove that you are sorry."

"What shall I do? Only order, and you shall see that I will obey."

"Well, dad and mother return to town the day after to-morrow, and I must give up my time to them until they go. But, after that, I shall expect you to fulfil all your promises."

"But Elinor and I return to Nutley the same day, and she may require my presence there."

"Why must you return to Nutley?"

“There is no absolute necessity, only we shall have been here three weeks.”

“Mountcarron says you have been accustomed to spend half your time at Carronby.”

“Yes! when my cousin was a bachelor.”

“Oh! It is *I*, then, to whom you object?”

“Why will you misinterpret my meaning so? How could I object to you? But it was more natural I should be with my cousin then. He has no need of my company now.

“But *I* have.”

“*You*—Lady—I mean, Gladys? If I only could believe so——”

“I tell you it is true! You don’t suppose (do you), that I mean to live half the year at Carronby without any society? You know that whenever Mountcarron is not occupied with his bailiff on his farm he will be out shooting. Besides, he doesn’t care for the same things I do. I wanted my sister to come and spend

several months with me, but her husband is such a wretch, he won't let her come, and so, if you desert me too, I shall be quite alone."

"I am sure that my sister would be delighted to come to you at any time, if you felt lonely; or, she would always make you welcome at Nutley."

"Thank you very much," says Gladys proudly; "I dare say I could find my way over to Nutley without your assistance, if I tried. But that is not what I asked you to do. You said just now I had but to order, and you would obey; and when I tell you I want your company, you suggest I can have your sister's. Well! you can go your own way then! I don't want to speak to you any more."

She walks up to the bench he has vacated, and seats herself upon it, with an averted face. Presently he creeps up, and takes a seat beside her.

"Gladys——"

"It's no use trying to smooth it over,

Mr. Brooke. You have shown me your mind too plainly, and I shall never ask you to do a thing for me again."

"O yes, you will! You could not be so unkind, even if you tried. And don't call me 'Mr. Brooke'; it sounds so uncousinly."

"You call me Lady Mountcarron."

"No, I don't—not now; and I will never call you so again, since you do not like it. Only don't be angry with me. I did it for the best."

"How could it be for the best?"

"I thought it was the proper thing to do. My sister had warned me not to be too familiar with you at first, for fear Mountcarron might not like it—and I—I—thought too, it was more prudent. But I will never think so again, if you wish me not to, and if you will only say that you forgive me."

"I *did* say it once, and then you broke out in a fresh place. But if you are *sure* you are sorry——"

"I am *very* sorry—more sorry than I can tell you."

"And you will take me walks through the forest?"

"I will take you anywhere you like."

"And teach me how to ride on horse-back?"

"Yes! yes!"

"And how to skate?"

"And how to skate, even in the middle of summer, if you wish it. Only look on me as a friend, and call me Jemmie."

"There's my hand upon it, Jemmie," she says, sweetly. He takes the slender hand, and raises it to his feverish lips.

"This seals the compact," he murmurs.

"And now, perhaps, you will pick up my basket, and shake the tree, so that I may get a few more mulberries. Mother is so fond of them; I promised to take her in some. And if I don't make haste, she will wonder what has become of me and them."

Then they shake the tree together, and



the ripe mulberries come rattling down upon their heads, staining their clothes, and making them laugh like two children up to mischief.

But as Mr. Brooke carries the basket of fruit to the house, and sees Gladys flitting before him in her white dress and broad-brimmed hat, like a spirit of the flowers, he sighs inwardly, and thinks, "Oh! my broken resolutions. What is the use of the fight I had with myself if a few kind words from her can make me forget them all? But how could any man resist accepting an invitation so tendered? I am not made of adamant."

He battles hard with himself, notwithstanding, during that and the following day, and has quite made up his mind to return with his sister to Nutley, when Fate steps in, and knocks all his good intentions on the head.

It is the morning of departure, and Mountcarron is lamenting over the loss of his guests.

"What are we to do without them, Gladys?" he asks. "It is too bad of them all to desert us at the same moment. Come, Jem, there's no reason you should go, at all events. Stay on at Carronby for a few weeks, like a good fellow."

"It's very kind of you to ask me, Mountcarron; but——"

"There's no 'but' in the matter, my boy. Elinor can do without you, I'll be bound; and you're no earthly use at Nutley."

"I won't go as far as to agree with you there, Mountcarron," says Lady Renton, in her gentle voice; "but if Jemmie would like to stay he knows his house and lands are safe in my care."

"Of course; besides, he can ride over every day if he wishes to see how matters are going on. Come, Jem, you have leave from head-quarters, and so I shan't let you go."

"If I can ride over from here to Nutley every day, I don't see what there is to

prevent my riding over from Nutley here," replies his cousin, dubiously.

"Only you won't. We know that too well. No, no, my boy! I can't spare you for another week or two, so please consider the matter settled."

"My portmanteau is packed, and on the carriage," continues Jemmie.

"Bother your portmanteau," exclaims the earl. Here, William," to a servant, "have Mr. Brooke's portmanteau taken off the carriage, and carried back to his room."

Mr. Brooke still stands irresolute, but an unconscious attraction makes him raise his eyes. They meet those of Gladys.

"Won't you stay?" she asks, softly.

"Oh! yes; of course! I mean to," he answers hurriedly, and immediately busies himself in seeing after the comfort of his sister, and handing Mrs. Fuller into the carriage that is to take her and the general to the station. The farewells are spoken—the visitors have departed—Mountcarron

has walked off to the stables. Gladys and Mr. Brooke are left alone.

"Thank you, cousin," she says sweetly ; and the young man gives himself up to the fascination of her society.



## CHAPTER VIII.

### “THE COUSINS.”

AFTER this defeat, Mr. Brooke ceases to fight with himself altogether. After all—as he thinks—what is there to fight about? The irrevocable cannot be undone! Gladys is his cousin’s wife, and, since she wishes it, it is absurd that he should deny himself the pleasure of being her friend, because he can be nothing more. She shall never guess the feelings he has been bold enough to entertain for her, and after a while he will forget the pain her presence causes him, or be cured of it, or grow accustomed to it, and he can so look on her in the same light in which she regards him. And so he remains, on an indefinite visit to Carronby, and

Lets the stream of circumstances carry him, resistlessly, to his fate. They are a very happy and united little family party, after the rest have left them. The Earl and Countess have decided to invite no more visitors until Christmas. Lord Mountcarron's long absence from home has caused his agricultural affairs to fall somewhat behind-hand, and the birds are not quite so plentiful this year as they were last, and the hunting season has commenced, when he shall require at least three days in the week to follow the hounds.

In fact the Earl has a dozen good reasons for not filling the house with guests that autumn, and Gladys is quite contented to let things remain as they are. All she stipulates for is, that her husband shall give her a nice quiet horse, on which she can take lessons in riding with Mr. Brooke.

"And you can come with us too, if you like, you know, Mountcarron," she adds

graciously, "and then I can have one of you on each side, to catch me, if I should fall off."

"Thank you, my dear," he rejoins, laughing; "but if you have no objection, I would rather delegate my duties as riding master to Jem. I have had no practice in teaching young ladies how to sit their horses. But, doubtless, you will prove an apt pupil, and be quite ready to join me in the hunting-field next season."

"And suppose I should tumble off and be killed?" suggests Gladys in an offended tone.

"Oh, Jem will take care of that! He is a perfect centaur, and knows all the tricks of the trade. And I really shall be too tired and too busy on my 'off' days, to trot about the lanes of Carronby after your ladyship."

"How selfish he is," remarks Gladys to Mr. Brooke, as the Earl leaves the room.

The young man opens his eyes. It

is the first time he has ever heard a word from her lips derogatory to her husband.

"Selfish," he echoes, "How?"

"I should not have thought it required an explanation! Can't you see that he would not give up a day of his beloved hunting to give me pleasure? If it depended on Mountcarron, I should never learn to ride on horseback at all."

"Are you not a little hard on him, Gladys? He acceded to your request without the slightest hesitation, and he will buy you as pretty a riding-horse as there is in the country."

"I have no doubt he will, if it gives him no trouble to get it! He will give me everything that money can procure. Why should he not? The money is mine, as well as his! But he would not relinquish an hour's pleasure to save my life, all the same."

"You do not do him justice," exclaims Mr. Brooke warmly, "Mountcarron is



selfish, I dare say—all men are—but he loves you very dearly, and would do anything to make you happy.”

“Yes?” replied the countess, in that provokingly interrogative tone that means, “No.”

Young Brooke reads her thoughts, and does not know whether to be pleased or vexed at the knowledge he gains by it.

“Of course you would prefer Mountcarron to be your teacher,” he says, presently.

“No! I shouldn’t.”

“Why are you angry, then?”

“I am not angry. I only made an ordinary remark. I didn’t know you would fire up so in his defence.”

“He has been very kind to me, Gladys, and—— I am his guest.”

“That needn’t make you tell stories about him.”

“I was not aware that I had.”

“Don’t *you* hunt?” asks Gladys, turning round suddenly to face him.

"Certainly !"

"And aren't you fond of it?"

"I don't know anything I like better," he cries, forgetting himself; "I think it is the most exciting—the most glorious sport on the face of the earth. And I have a couple of such splendid hunters, Gladys. You must come over to Nutley, some day, and see them. Elinor calls them my children."

"You seem to care for hunting, almost as much as Mountcarron does," she remarks, drily.

"Oh ! I am sure I do. No one *could* care for it more ardently than myself."

"And yet you propose to give up half your fun to dance attendance upon me. Why, *you* care for me more than he does."

This unconscious shaft goes right home to the young man's heart. He colours, turns pale, and is silent. Finally he walks off to the window in order to recover himself.

"Have I said anything wrong, Jemmi? I didn't mean it."

"No! indeed you haven't, Gladys. It is I who was wrong in saying there was nothing I liked better than hunting. I prefer infinitely to give you pleasure."

"Well, then! you've come round to my opinion," exclaims the countess excitedly. "Lord Mountcarron does not prefer giving me pleasure to providing it for himself. And that is being selfish - Isn't it now? Am I not right? Do say I am."

"Don't let us discuss the question," he returns, uneasily. "There are plenty of pleasanter things to talk about. First and foremost, your horse that is to be. I don't think Mountcarron has one in the stables to suit you. I wish he would let me buy it. I know of such a nice little animal, at Brighton, that a friend of mine wants to get rid of."

"Go and buy it at once," says Gladys, authoritatively. "I give you leave—and,

if Mountcarron doesn't like it, he can talk to me."

"No, no! Gladys," cries Mr. Brooke, laughing, "your ladyship must not be quite so independent, nor do I think Mountcarron would like to see his duty delegated to another. We must consult him first."

But the consultation proves a mere formula.

The Earl consents at once, only too pleased to have the trouble taken off his hands.

"Do just as you like about it, my dear Jem, and, if the animal is safe and sound, buy it."

"I know it to be safe and sound, or I should never have proposed it should carry your wife. My friend's daughter has ridden it for two years."

"All right! Tell him to send it over."

"No; I think I will go to Brighton and see the animal again before you purchase it. It may have had a strange rider during the last few months."

“How deuced particular you are!”

“Well, you know how a hard hand will spoil a horse. It was gentle enough when I saw it last, but it may have changed. I shall go to Brighton and judge for myself.”

“All right, old fellow, do just as you like, but don’t bother me. What with the ‘Squire’s’ strain, and the bailiff having muddled up the farm accounts, I’ve more than enough on my mind already; so I must leave Gladys and her steed entirely to you.”

And Mr. Brooke wonders, as he turns on his heel, if Gladys is so entirely wrong in her estimation of the earl’s character, and whether he might not come out in rather a bad light towards her, if his inclinations interfered with his duty. But the greatest wonder to Jemmie is how so young a girl should have discovered the truth so soon.

He has no idea, as yet, but that Gladys’ marriage with his cousin was one of affec-

tion, and it seems strange that she should see his faults so easily. It is not long before he is undeceived.

The horse is seen, and approved of, and purchased, and before a week is over her head Lady Mountcarron has received her first riding lesson, and from that time is almost constantly in the saddle. She will not allow Mr. Brooke to give up his hunting entirely for her sake; but there are many days when he is not disposed to hunt, or, at least, he says so. Many mornings which they spend rambling about the woods or lanes of Carronby together—many evenings passed at the piano, singing tender ballads, or in the library reading the latest poems of Tennyson, Browning, or Rossetti.

Meanwhile, Lord Mountcarron hunts or superintends the farming operations, or slumbers comfortably in his arm-chair after a long days' run, and a good dinner. He sees no harm in these two young people being thrown constantly

together. He is too indolent and selfish to see it. Had anyone been bold enough to suggest such an idea to him, he would have laughed, and answered that it was "*only Jem*," as if Jem were some innocent creature, warranted not to bite. Many husbands act in the same way, and from the same reason. They are too conceited of their own merits, to consider it possible their wives can see anything attractive in another man, and when they wake up some fine day to find themselves deserted, they plead in extenuation of their wilful neglect that they trusted the women too much to suspect them. It is a false excuse. What we treasure most, we guard with the greatest care; and it is only a fool who leaves a jewel on his table, and then cries out that he has been deceived when some one sharper than himself has carried it off.

Lord Mountcarron was very much "*in love*" with his young wife when he married her; but that event took place now fully

Four months ago, and when a man has possessed a woman for four months, his passion is apt to have cooled. He believes that he loves Gladys just as much as ever he did—he would not miss her from Carronby House for all the world—he thinks her as beautiful and graceful as on the day she became his wife—but he is quite willing that all the trouble of her shall fall on other hands. Gladys read his character aright, when she said he would give her everything that money could procure, but nothing that involved a sacrifice of his own inclinations.

And he leaves her to herself and the society of Mr. Brooke. A month has passed, but there is no talk of the young man returning to his own home. His hunters have been transferred from Nutley to the Carronby stables, and Lady Renton drives over in her pony-chaise once or twice a week, and calls him "*a lazy boy*," and asks if he means to take up his residence at Carronby altogether.



But no one urges him to return home, and something in his own heart urges him very strongly to stay. Gladys and he have become like brother and sister—or so it seems to Gladys.

She tells Jemmie everything—in fact, a great deal more than she ought to tell him—and he listens, and sympathises, and condoles with her. But the most fatal mistake she makes is to tell him she doesn't love her husband.

He has never suspected it before, and the revelation comes upon him like a shock. They are walking in the park together, and Gladys has been twitting him upon his solemn looks. In truth, Jemmie both looks and feels sad that morning. Something has been said at breakfast time about their plans for the next year, which has made him realise that, however intimate he may be when they are at home, in all the important affairs of life, they two, Mountcarron and Gladys, will be together, and he will be alone. And the conviction has

cast an undefinable gloom over him, which he finds a difficulty in shaking off.

"Cheer up, Jemmie," says Gladys, after a pause on his part. "I can't bear to see you with that long face. What's the matter?"

"I cannot tell you, Gladys. I hardly know myself. Only I feel sad sometimes to think that this pleasant life of ours cannot last for ever."

"Why shouldn't it? As long as we are alive, that is to say."

"It is impossible. Indeed, my sister wants me to go back to Nutley even now."

"But Nutley is not on the other side of the world! You can come over every day from Nutley, if you like——"

"True, so long as you and Mountcarron are at Carronby."

"And when we leave Carronby, it will only be to go to London for the season, and, of course, you will come too. Oh,

Jemmie! don't be so disagreeable, and conjure up horrors that will never come to pass."

"I don't want to be disagreeable, Gladys, but I know that some day we must part."

"Why should we? You can always go where we do."

"Mountcarron may not wish to have me eternally trotting after him."

"Bother Mountcarron! I wish it, and that's quite enough! You're the only friend I have that I care for, and I won't let you go! I should be miserable without you."

"Is not your sister, Mrs. Prendergast, going to spend Christmas at Carronby?"

"Yes, but she's not *you*. I have never been able to talk to Winnie as I do to you. You understand me, and don't call all my ideas fantastical, and overstrained, and romantic. You and my dad are the only people I really love in the whole world!"

"You forget Mountcarron," says Mr. Brooke, hastily.

"No, I don't! I wish I could. But I never cared for him, you know."

She blurts it out in her careless fashion, and her companion believes at first she must be joking.

"Oh, Gladys! don't say that—even in jest!"

"But it isn't jest—it's the truth! Why, Jemmie," stopping short in the pathway and confronting him, "you never thought I cared for him, did you?"

"Why, of course, I did; and I think so now. What else should you marry him for?"

This plain question brings the blood into Gladys' cheek, but she answers it bluntly, nevertheless.

"To be a countess. You don't suppose I meant to remain an old maid, do you? or to become a plain Mrs. Jones, or Tompkins, without any money or position, or anything else?"

Why, I declare you are as bad as my old dad."

There is silence between them then for a few moments. Jemmie does not know what to answer to her frank avowal. His young blood is boiling and bubbling in his veins, at the idea that she does not love her husband, and yet he cannot say that he approves of it.

"Why don't you speak?" cries Gladys, impatiently; "you need not think me so very bad for that. Hundreds of girls do the same thing. What is the good of marriage, if it does not raise you to a higher sphere? And I don't believe you ever thought I loved him. How *could* I love him? You know we are as different as light from darkness; but I can be a very good wife to him all the same."

"Are you sure of that?" says Jemmie, in a dreamy voice; "suppose—some day—you were to meet another man—and—love him?"

"O! I shall never do that," cries Gladys, with crimson cheeks; "I'm not that sort of girl; I hate love-making and all such nonsense. It's much better to be true friends, like you and me—isn't it?"

"Much better," he murmurs indistinctly.

"I don't want to complain of Mount-carron," she goes on, hastily; "he is just what I expected him to be, and I have everything I want; I wouldn't have things altered for the world. And I only mentioned it to show you that I do not depend on him for company, and never shall."

"And you don't love him? You are *sure* of it?" continues Mr. Brooke. Isn't it a little freak now, on your part? Hasn't he been hasty, or made you jealous?"

"*Made me jealous!*" interrupts the countess, scornfully; "he *couldn't*, if he tried!"

"And yet you *can* be jealous—of a *friend*," says Jemmie; "for I got it hot

enough from you for riding with Miss ~~Rusherton~~ Rusherton, last week."

"I don't choose that you should ride with Miss Rusherton," replies Gladys, proudly; "she is a forward, presuming girl, and you will have all Carronby saying you are engaged to her, next."

"And what if they did? She has plenty of money. Why shouldn't I marry her for her money—as you did Mountcarron."

Gladys darts a look at him of mingled fear and anger; a look he is not slow to understand. He quiets her by laying his hand upon her arm.

"Don't be afraid, Gladys; the banns are not put up yet; you will not lose your cousin this time. But I really don't see why I shouldn't follow your example."

"I do. A girl is quite different from a man. She has to look out for herself in this world. And—and—don't think the worse of me for what I have told you, Jemmie. I have never told anyone else, except my dad. But, it's all for the best,

isn't it. If I had not married Mountcarron, I should never have met you."

"I don't know that *that* could have been accounted a misfortune," he answers somewhat bitterly.

"Oh, Jemmie! *that* is unkind! when we are such good friends, too. Why, it's worth marrying Mountcarron only to have you for a cousin."

"Yes! that's all you women think of," he says, sarcastically, "a title—a fortune—and a position—and you don't care what poor beggars you trample on, in your efforts to attain them. What does it signify *who* suffers, so long as you are the Countess of Mountcarron?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that, having gained all you want, and reached the height of your ambition, you might have been content with that, and kept *friends* out of the bargain."

"And don't you want to be my friend, then?"

"No——"



"Jemmie! what do you mean?"

"I don't know myself. You've driven me half mad with what you've told me to-day. Poor Mountcarron! I think he deserved a better fate than this. To be married only for the benefits which he can give a woman."

"*He doesn't!*" cries Gladys boldly. "He married me for the same reasons—for the good looks and the credit that I brought him! It was a fair bargain! He loves me no more than I love him."

"Do you think so, Gladys?"

"I am sure of it! You can't judge of a man by the way he treats his wife in public. It is easy enough to call me '*dear*.' But we women want actions, and not words. And everything that is *done* for me, is done by my servants—or by *you*," she adds in a lower key.

"And I shall always be ready to serve you, Gladys," he exclaims eagerly. "You may count on my devotion to your life's end."

"Well, then, don't scold me again, Jemmie; and don't pity your cousin for having married me."

"*Pity him!* My God! I am very far from pitying him. You are a thousand times too good for him."

"That is just what I think myself. But don't let us talk of him any more. There are so many livelier subjects."

"But I cannot think of anything else," says Mr. Brooke. "My brain is whirling. Fancy! your not caring for him all this while. And I have been so blind! I thought you such a happy and contented girl."

"And so I am! I don't *want* to care for him. I care for you, and that is quite sufficient."

She makes the assertion with all the thoughtless defiance of a child—meaning nothing by it beyond what she says—and little dreaming of the hopes that she awakens in her companion's breast.

"God grant you may always care for

me," says the young man fervently, as he presses her arm against his side.

"It's not worth praying for," replies Gladys, "for I couldn't help it, if I tried. And so there's an end of it."

It would be well for her, if it were the end of it.



## CHAPTER IX.

### A DISCOVERY.

FROM the moment of her avowal of indifference to her husband, Mr Brooke views everything that Gladys says, or does, from another standpoint, and it is too soon inevitably followed by a second confession, that of his love for herself. He does not mean to tell it—he betrays it involuntarily—by far the most dangerous mode for a man to let a woman know he cares for her. It is only an accidental touch of her hand—an averted face—and a flushed cheek, that tell the tale. It has happened fifty times before, and she has read nothing in the signs that follow it. But, to-day, she does. To-day, fate, or chance, or whatever it is that mixes itself up with our mortal affairs, and twists

and turns them at its will, without any reference to our wishes, suddenly pulls the veil from her eyes, and she knows that James Brooke loves her. More still, he sees she knows it, and after that, the young man feels there is but one thing to be done. He must leave Carronby. No word is exchanged between them of the discovery they have made, but their eyes meet, and language is unnecessary. Gladys turns away, more sadly than indignantly, and Jemmie says—

“The sooner I go back to Nutley, the better, don’t you think so?”

“Yes,” replies Gladys, “Lady Renton has wanted you there for some time. Christmas will be here in another fortnight.”

And so, without further demur, he leaves them. In the first flush of the revelation made to her, Lady Mountcarron does not see anything particular to cry over, or to be very much shocked at. Of course it’s very wrong of Jemmie—she calls him ‘*that naughty boy*’ in her thoughts, every time she thinks of him—and yet, she is secretly

flattered by the idea of his allegiance. She feels secure with regard to herself, and the sufferings he may undergo in the attempt to conquer his ill-fated passion never trouble her mind. Her professed indifference to him, except as a friend, makes her selfish. Had he rushed from her presence for ever—or sought forgetfulness in change of scene—then, indeed, might Lady Mountcarron have been aroused to the conviction that she had lost something that she cared for. But as he has only gone to Nutley—two miles off—and they are sure to meet each other constantly, either at one house or the other, she indulges herself by nursing the flattery conveyed in the knowledge of his hopeless attachment for her. And, for a few days after his departure, she really finds it more exciting to take her walks, or rides, with the constant expectation of meeting him round the next corner, than to have him always at her side. But, the weeks pass, and she neither sees nor hears of him, and then she becomes discontented.

She begins to miss this charming companion who threw such a new light upon her favourite authors—and could read poetry with so good a rhythm—and translate all the scraps of Greek and Latin she met in the pursuit of knowledge. For Mr. Brooke is not merely an educated man. He is a man who has studied to please himself. He has a mind of a high intellectual order, capable not only of great mental but of great moral development. He has passed through College with honours, and only been prevented from following the profession for which he was designed—the Bar—by the misfortune of his father's death, and his own independence.

He is not wealthy, but he possesses a fair income, and that fact, united to a naturally rather sensuous and pleasure-seeking temperament, have contrived to make him (as yet) an idle man. But he is, on that very account, all the more charming as a companion for daily life. There is no need for him to hurry over a conversation, or an

argument. He has plenty of leisure to pour out the wealth of his knowledge for the good of his friends, and Lady Mountcarron has freely benefited by the fact. He has read with her and sang with her. He has told her something new with every word that issued from his mouth. He is as familiar with the poets as he is with the bridle rein. She has regarded him as a store-house of knowledge, although the facts and quotations he has flung around him so freely have only been the out-pourings of his university "cram." And now she must learn to do without him. He may ride over from Nutley occasionally and take her for a gallop, or dine with Mountcarron and herself, but the free, unfettered companionship is over—the daily intercourse a thing of the past, and Gladys soon begins to fret over it as a serious loss. But Mr. and Mrs. Prendergast, with their baby and several other guests, arrive about this time to spend Christmas at Carronby, and her thoughts are diverted for a while



from Mr. Brooke. Of course, the sisters have plenty to say to each other. Young married women are much more confidential about their various experiences than unmarried girls. The imbecility, or indifference, or brutality of their husbands, is freely discussed amongst them, together with their own patience, long-suffering, and general amiability. But Winnie and Gladys do not talk together after this fashion. The elder sister is, unfortunately, ceasing to care what her husband does, or does *not* do, and the younger one has never cared at all. Mrs. Prendergast's thoughts are all occupied with her baby's growth and development, and Lady Mountcarron can only discuss dress and the prospects of the coming season. Her heart is burning to relieve itself on one subject, but her natural instincts keep her silent. She is growing cunning over the knowledge she has attained. She tells herself that it would be unfair to betray poor Jemmie's secret to Winnie, or anyone, and fully

believes that a feeling of honour is the only bar to her confidence. She deceives herself; but she is not the first woman who has done so. Lady Renton and Mr. Brooke have been invited to dine at Carronby House on Christmas day, and it is not until Christmas day that Gladys meets Jemmie after their mutual understanding. She has watched for him each morning since, but she has watched in vain. The only sign she has received that he remembers her is conveyed by a basket of Christmas roses, which she finds in her room on the evening of that day. As she fastens some of the pure, waxen-looking, white flowers, with their golden petals, in her hair and bosom, she wonders why her fingers tremble, and laughs nervously as she catches a reflection of her flushed and agitated features in the mirror.

"Poor, dear Jemmie," she thinks, "I shall be glad when this meeting is over, for *his* sake. I daresay he is nervous.

Boys are so foolish ; but he will feel better afterwards, and then we can go on in the old way again."

She is relieved when she descends to the dining-room to find it is full of guests, and Lady Renton and Mr. Brooke amongst them. She has to apologise for her late appearance, and her fluttered manner and uneasy laugh pass muster as excuses. She dare not lift her eyes to Jemmie's face, but she colours brightly under the pressure of his hand when he comes forward to greet her, and the Christmas roses in her bosom rise and fall like living things.

As hostess, Lady Mountcarron is, of course, obliged to go in to dinner with the man of highest rank after her husband, and as fate will have it, Mr. Brooke happens to be that man.

"Jemmie, *you* fall to Gladys to-night," says the earl lightly, as he stalks off to the dining-room with the oldest and ugliest woman on his arm. The rest of the visitors

pair off and file in. Mr. Brooke approaches Lady Mountcarron.

"Permit me," he says formally, extending his arm. She takes it, and he feels the trembling of her hand. He regards the fluttering fingers for a moment—as the rest of the party turn their backs upon them—and from them glances upwards to the fair, agitated face.

"Are you glad to see me, Gladys?" he whispers.

She does not answer, but her breast heaves, and her white teeth clench themselves upon her lower lip to hide its trembling. Mr. Brooke regards her in silence, and interprets her agitation aright.

"My darling," he says in a low voice as he leads her into the dining-room. After this the Christmas dinner passes, for two people there at least, like a troubled dream. Roast turkey, roast beef, mince pies, and plum pudding, flit before their eyes successively, like nightmares. The names of dishes shouted in their ears, seem

to be spoken miles away. Mr. Brooke lets the wine circulate, and go past him, and wakes up with a start to recall it, when Lord Mountcarron asks him with a coarse laugh, what he is thinking about. Gladys eats nothing, and her hand shakes so she can hardly keep up the semblance of eating.

Winnie remarks her manner, and asks her in a whisper if she is ill. Whereupon Lady Mountcarron also wakes up, and attempts to swallow an ice that makes her feel very ill. The dinner is followed by several dull, stupid speeches, about good fellowship and the advantage of a Christmas meeting, that sound to Gladys like buzzing machinery, that makes her brain whirl. She is thankful when the ordeal is concluded, and she can give the ladies the signal to retire. As she reaches the drawing-room she almost throws herself upon the sofa. Winnie goes up to her in alarm.

“Gladys, darling! what is the matter?”

You have looked so strange all dinner time. Are you ill?"

"My dear! the room was so abominably hot, who *could* feel well? And I detest roast beef and plum pudding, nasty vulgar things. The very smell of them makes me sick. I shall be all right again presently."

Winnie is judiciously silent. She imagines naturally that there may be a reason for this ultra-fastidiousness on her sister's part, and she will not force her confidence. But Lady Mountcarron's next words are strangely at variance with her first speech. She turns her lovely violet eyes upon Mrs. Prendergast and says:

"Oh, Winnie! I am *so* happy. I don't think I ever felt so happy in my life as I do this Christmas day. I hope it is not a forerunner of tears."

"Why should it be? It is only natural that you should feel happy. This is the first Christmas you have spent since your marriage, and you feel the difference between your new life and the old one.

You would be very ungrateful if you did *not* feel happy ! I only wish mother and dad had been with us."

"Oh, yes ! I wanted them so. Dear dad!—my dear, darling old dad," cries Gladys, hiding her face in the sofa cushions and bursting into an unexpected flood of tears. Winnie is sure now that her sister must be ill, and all her efforts are directed towards her relief. The ladies cluster round her sympathetically, and recommend sal volatile, and red lavender, and ammonia and fresh air, until Lady Mountcarron breaks from them to the shelter of her own apartments, whence she emerges in another half hour, fresh, smiling and radiant, having apparently quite overcome her temporary indisposition. Mr. Brooke is standing about the inner drawing-room, evidently on the look out for her, and she goes straight up to him and tries hard to speak with her former freedom and unrestraint.

"I have not thanked you yet, Jemmie,

for your roses. You see, I hope, that I am wearing them, and I like them more than all my other presents put together."

"Had I dared, I would have sent you something better," he replies.

"You *could* not, had you tried. You know you have taught me yourself to love flowers above all other things. But I cannot give *you* flowers. It would seem silly. So I am going to ask you to take this," she says, in rather a timid manner, as she holds out a ring, set with a single diamond, to him, "and wear it in remembrance of this Christmas day."

"I thank you for the thought, Gladys," he answers; "but I would rather not."

"Mountcarron did not give it to me," returns Gladys quickly. "It was a present from my father on my sixteenth birthday, and I wore it till—till last July. Please take it, Jemmie. I wore it for three years, and I would like to think you wore it now."

"If that is the case, I will accept it," re-



plies Mr. Brooke gravely, drawing the ring upon his little finger, "and it is needless to tell you I shall value it, Gladys. I need something to comfort me," he continues, raising his weary eyes to hers, "for I am going away."

"*Going away!* Where?" she asks in dismay.

"I have decided to go up to London, and study for the bar. I think I have told you it was the profession for which my father intended me. And it is one—luckily for me—which a man may enter at any age."

"But you have no need of a profession," says Gladys breathlessly. "You had relinquished all thoughts of embracing one. What has made you alter your decision?"

"Can you ask me, Gladys?"

"I mean—why should you not stay at Nutley, as you have always done? There is plenty to occupy you there, if you want occupation."

"Because Nutley is too near to Carronby," he answers simply. "Besides I have more need of a profession now than ever. I must have something to divert my thoughts, and I know of nothing better than hard work. I ought not to have come here to-night, Gladys. I am too weak even to stand in your presence. I should not have done so, had it not been for the last time."

Her face is blanched with tears—her scared eyes seek his like those of a frightened fawn. She hears nothing—knows nothing—except that he is about to leave her.

"Oh, Jemmie!" she exclaims pathetically, "*don't go*. Don't leave me alone. You are the only friend I care for in the world."

They are almost by themselves, for the room they stand in is deserted, and a lady in the front drawing-room, who believes that she can sing, is screeching "*Forget, Forgive!*" at the top of her voice. Mr.

Brooke moves a little nearer to her as he replies :

“ What is to become of us, Gladys, if I remain ? ”

“ What should become of us, except to be happy and enjoy each other’s society as we did before ? I have been so miserable without you, Jemmie. This last fortnight has seemed like a year. I don’t care to ride, or anything. Mountcarron came out with me one day and he talked of nothing but turnips the whole way from Carronby to Aylmer. And I’ve hardly read a line since you left us. What’s the good of reading when you have no one to talk to about it ? You shouldn’t have stayed here so long, Jemmie, if you meant to go away after all. You have made me feel I can’t do without you.”

“ Yes, *that* was my fault, I acknowledge it. I should not have stayed here so long. It was bad for both of us. I have been a selfish beast, Gladys, only thinking of the present, and my own pleasure. Let me

try and rectify the error. Let me go away now."

"No, I *won't* let you go away—not so far as London!" she says, determinedly, seeing her power over him. "I can't do without you, Jemmie. I want you here, and you must stay."

He raises his eyes—very weary and languid they look, as if he were tired of fighting with himself, but very full of passion—and fixes them upon her pleading face.

"Will you take the responsibility of my staying on yourself, Gladys?"

She does not understand the full meaning of his words, but if she did, she would answer just as boldly. It is her nature to be reckless, and her education has made her more so.

"Yes, I will take all the responsibility if you will stay, and I will be answerable for nothing if you go away. You are my only friend and adviser. If you leave me, I shall go all wrong, and poison Mount-

carron, or do something playful. Oh, Jemmie! *do promise* me that you will stay ! ”

“ I *do promise*, ” he replies. “ God forgive me if I am wrong to do so, but you have broken down all my resolutions, and made me weak as water. For good or for evil, Gladys, *I will stay !* ”

“ That’s a dear boy ! Oh, you have made me so happy ! And will you come and ride with me to-morrow morning ? ”

“ If you wish it—yes. ”

“ Of course I wish it ! I haven’t had a good gallop since you went to Nutley. It is no fun, riding alone, and oh, Jemmie ! don’t go home in the evenings ! Stop and spend them with Winnie and me, and let us go on with our reading. We had only just begun Shelley when you went home. ”

“ Be merciful, Gladys. Don’t try me too hard. I have not your strength of mind, or purpose. ”

“ Oh, it will come ! We have only to

make up our minds to a thing, and it grows easy. And why—why are we to give up every pleasure because—because——?"

"Because we cannot have our hearts' desire? Well, Gladys, perhaps you are right. There is so little happiness in this world, it is folly to reject what we *may* have."

"I am always happy with *you*, Jemmie."

"Ah, don't say such dangerous things to me, Gladys! It is bad enough to know you *think* them."

"And don't you *wish* me to like you, then?" she asks, with her violet eyes upon him.

He returns the look—and says *nothing*.

"Are you two people going to spend the whole of the evening in the back drawing-room?" asks Winnie, breaking in upon their conference. "Gladys, they want me to sing! Do you think you could manage one of Mendelssohn's duets with me?"

"I daresay I can, unless I have forgotten them. Find the music, and I will join you

in a minute. At eleven o'clock to-morrow, then," she says to Mr. Brooke, as her sister leaves the room."

"I will be punctual—trust me!"

"And the ring, Jemmie?" she whispers. "You will wear it, won't you? Not in remembrance of this day only, but of our renewed pledge of friendship."

"Dear ring!" he answers, as he raises the jewel to his lips.



## CHAPTER X.

### “MUTUAL CONFESSIONS.”

**A**FTER this the Christmas week passes merrily. The guests of Carronby amuse themselves with riding, dancing and acting charades, and Lady Mountcarron and Mr. Brooke are the gayest and the most mirthful of them all. But before she returns to London, Mrs. Prendergast detects a fresh mood in her sister—a mood she has never observed before, and one which makes her rather uneasy.

It has been patent to all her family that Gladys does not love her husband. That fact is nothing new. But she has never openly expressed her indifference, nor evinced a palpable dislike to him. And now she does.



The first time that it occurs, Lady Mountcarron enters the room where Winnie is playing with the baby, screwing up her face, turning down her lips, and wearing a general expression of distaste, as if she had swallowed a dose of medicine.

"What's the matter?" demanded her sister in surprise.

"Nothing particular; only Mountcarron's just kissed me."

Winnie looks at her for a moment, and bursts out laughing.

"My dear child! you are the absurdest girl I ever knew. What would people say if they heard you talk like that about your husband kissing you?"

"They won't hear me. I shouldn't tell it to anyone but you. But I hate being kissed—as *he* kisses me."

"Have you tried any other way, my dear?" demands Mrs. Prendergast, drily.

"No," replies Gladys, colouring up to her eyes.

"What is it you object to, then?"

"Everything. I detest the whole process. Why do girls ever marry? They would be much happier at home."

"I don't think *you* would. I think it would take a great deal, Gladys, to make you give up the pomp and pleasure of your high position, and the wealth and luxury you have obtained with it. Now, confess. You would not be 'Miss Fuller' again if you could?"

"No," replies Lady Mountcarron, plainly, "I would not. I am not tired of my bargain yet. But I did not know it would be quite such a hard one. I did not suppose, for example, that because a girl became a man's wife, she must submit to be kissed whether she likes it or not. I have never been in love with Mountcarron, and——"

"But that's the secret of it, my dear," interrupted Mrs. Prendergast. "If you *were* in love with him, you would like to be kissed."

"No, I shouldn't," says Gladys, stoutly.

"I might like to *give* kisses. I should never like to have them taken from me against my will. What I hate is being treated like so much property, as if I had been bought and paid for."

"Ah! Gladys! that is just what you have been. That is the price you have to pay for your coronet," sighs Winnie, "that I have to pay for my board and lodging. That assumption of entire possession of a woman—that rubbing off all the guilt from the gingerbread—is the great drawback of married life. It disillusion us so soon."

"Then *you* have had to pass through it too?" exclaimed the younger girl. "*You* can understand what I feel, Winnie, although you quite believed you were in love with Maurice when you married him. What is the use then of talking about the necessity of love? It has not saved you from having your eyes opened."

Mrs. Prendergast thinks a moment before she answers :

"No, dear; but that very fact has made

me see there is only one safeguard in marriage, and that is self-respect. Whatever you may feel, or not feel for Mountcarron, Gladys, don't let the world guess it."

"He is so *coarse*," says Lady Mountcarron, longing, now that the ice is broken, to make a confidante of her sister. "He never spares me in any way. He repeats every story he hears—blasphemous or otherwise—and if I look shocked, or disgusted, he calls me a prude. You know how I always shrunk from that sort of talk, Winnie. I cannot take any pleasure in it. It makes me sick."

"You must learn to put up with it," says Winnie oracularly. "Maurice did just the same with me. We can't be too innocent before men marry us, and our innocence is the last thing they respect afterwards. And when they have inoculated us with the worst knowledge they are masters of, they are surprised if we grow reckless and defiant like themselves."

"But are *all* men like that?" cries

Gladys eagerly. "Do they *all* turn round after marriage, and laugh at the reticence they professed to admire before? Are there *no* men in the world who love a woman for her delicacy, and try to preserve it."

Winnie shakes her head.

"Not *husbands*, I am afraid, at least I never heard of any. I have known so many girls who married, full of hope and grand ideas of their new life, and who have been disenchanted, as it were, upon the very threshold, by what their husbands said, and did before them. Men are very careful not to wound the modesty of the women they are engaged to, but they seem to think it impossible that they can shock their wives. And yet we do make such ideal heroes of them beforehand. It is hard to be brought to one's senses so soon!"

Lady Mountcarron heaves a deep sigh.

"My husband has quite taken the gloss off married life for me. But I suppose it would have been the same with any man."

"I am afraid it would, for *you*, Gladys," says Winnie, "I don't think you are a girl that would ever care to be made love to."

"Wouldn't I?" returns the other thoughtfully. "I don't know. I have never tried it. But the man who wants to win me must *woo* me like the western wind, and not rush on me like a tornado, and tear me to pieces as a tiger does meat. Such violent measures have no delight for me. He must have a little more poetry and sentiment in his composition, and a little less love of eating than my lord and master. In fact, Winnie, he must be my companion, which Mountcarron never has been and never will be. I don't think I should mind so much being kissed then, by lips I loved, perhaps. But they must not be like Mountcarron's. If I loved them, they never could be."

Mrs. Prendergast is fairly frightened by this harangue. She is sweet-tempered, like her father; but she is practical, like her mother. She does not possess the romance

and powers of imagination that underlie her sister's character.

For Gladys' faults are those of education, rather than of birth. She has been reared in a worldly and self-seeking school, but she has depths of feeling which have never yet been stirred. It is not so with Winnie. She has been in love, and married, and been disenchanted, and has resigned herself contentedly to the disappointment, and centred her interest, like a sensible woman, in her child.

But all women cannot be sensible because it is best to be so. Some strong natures rebel against their lot in life, and beat against the bars of their prison, like a wild bird in a cage. And sensible people are frightened by their rebellion, as Winnie is frightened by Gladys. Her blue eyes—more plaintive and less bright than those of her sister—open in distressed surprise.

“My dear girl! what are you talking of? You are married! remember. You have no right even to *think* of such things. You

can never have anything to do with kisses, except from the earl.

Lady Mountcarron rouses herself suddenly.

"Of course not! What a fool I am! I was half asleep, Winnie, and dreaming of impossibilities. Please don't look scared, dear! What did I say so dreadful? But, oh, Win," she continues, sadly, "life is hard."

"It is, dear! Nobody denies it! It is so hard that I wonder people get through it as well as they do. But you and I are not going to be of the number that make it harder. I am not speaking on the score of morality, darling, but from sheer motives of policy. However disappointing our marriages may have proved to be, it is wiser to accept them as they are, and make the best of them—because they cannot be undone, without a more miserable failure still."

"Then you think all men are equally unsatisfactory?" says Gladys, thoughtfully.



"I think there are very few of them that can stand the test of a daily and intimate communion. And I think a girl like yourself—of refined taste, and with an ultra-sensitive nature—would find it difficult to live happily with any man. For they are *not* refined, as a rule, Gladys, and the sooner you make up your mind to that the better."

"I shall go for a walk," says Lady Mountcarron suddenly, preparing to leave the room.

"Shall I go with you, dear?"

"No, I thank you, Winnie! I want to be alone, and think over what you have said. I cannot believe that all men are—like Mountcarron!"

"It will be the worse for your peace of mind if you do *not* believe it," replies Winnie, as she looks anxiously after her sister.

Gladys gets her walking things, and strolls out into the park, where she expects to meet Jemmie.

Mr. Brooke has not taken up his residence again at Carronby, but he walks, or rides, over there every day, and he never leaves Gladys in ignorance of where he may be found.

It does not strike either of them that these meetings are very like clandestine ones. Why should they meet clandestinely, when Jemmie has free access to his cousin's house, and Gladys is on intimate terms with Nutley? What is more natural than—living under separate roofs—they should let each other know, where they are to be found upon the following day? It saves so much trouble in sending messages, backwards and forwards. Their friendship has made rapid strides, since the meeting upon Christmas day. If it was an infant then—an infant that didn't even know by what name to call itself—it is a giant now—a dangerous giant that has looked into its own heart, though it will not yet confess what it has found there—and is ready to trample down every obstacle that lies before

it. So it is not remarkable that, as Lady Mountcarron, looking charmingly girlish and dainty, wrapped in her costly furs, trips down the path that leads to Moonlight Dell, she should come upon Mr. Brooke, arrayed in brown velveteen and knickerbockers, with his gun in his hand, standing by the side of the pond, and gazing thoughtfully into the water.

"What are you dreaming of, Jemmie?" she asks, as she reaches his side and slips her hand through his arm. He presses the little hand fondly, and answers:

"Wondering if I should not be wiser to throw myself into that water, and end all my troubles at once, Gladys——"

"Naughty boy! when I am here to comfort you! What should *I* do if you were to drown yourself, Jemmie?"

"Cry for me a little while, and then forget me."

"I should *never* forget you. I couldn't."

"Not till some one else was mad enough to fall in love with you, and then you

would begin to torture him as you torture me."

"How do I torture you?"

"By existing, Gladys.

"I wish I didn't exist, then," cries the girl fretfully; "I am sure, what with Mountcarron on one side, and you on the other, life isn't worth having."

"What has Mountcarron been doing now?"

"Nothing out of the way. Only he kissed me, and I do hate it so; and Winnie says I shall have to endure it to my life's end. It's enough to make anyone wish that she was dead and buried."

"Do you dislike his kisses so much Gladys?"

"I *hate* them! and I hate him; I hate him to come near me or to touch me. I would like to cut my lips off, since he has kissed them."

"You did not always feel such a repugnance to him."

"Yes; I did! Not quite so much,

perhaps, as now, but I never could stand his making love to me. Oh, Jemmie! sometimes I think——”

“What do you think, dear?”

He has drawn her to him, and thrown his arm around her shoulders. So they stand—sheltered from observation from the house by the rising ground on either side—and he holds her closely to him, and looks down into her lovely face.”

“Sometimes,” she says, with a shiver, “I wonder if *anything* is worth the life I lead with him. The title, or the fortune, or any of the possessions for which *you* say we girls would sell our souls. But I did not know then what I know now. I did not believe the world *could* hold anything I should value more.”

“And does it, Gladys?” he whispered.

“You *know* it does.”

He bends his handsome, boyish face closer to hers. She sees the tender light kindling in his eyes as his lips draw nearer to her own, and yet she does not

shrink from him nor draw her lips away. And then he lays his mouth—warm as an infant's, nervous and sensitive as a woman's, pure almost as a girl's—upon her mouth, and presses on it his first kiss of love. It lasts but a moment, but it seals their fate. They will never go back to friendship now. Gladys says nothing; but she lays her head down on his shoulder, and wishes it could last for ever. Her companion, too, is silent as herself. But, after a while, he says, in a low tone of happiness—

"You *love me*, darling?"

"Oh, yes; *I love you!* What is the good of denying it? you must have guessed it long ago. But it can never be any more than love between us, Jemmie; so the less we speak of it the better."

"My God!" groans the young man, "what have we done that this joy should come to us too late? We, who are in the first flush of our youth and strength, and powers of loving. Oh, Gladys! my angel! I loved you from the first hour we

met! Why did I not have the courage to let you see my love?"

"It would have been no use," she answers sadly; "I was already pledged to your cousin."

"You would have broken that pledge, my darling. Had you known of my passionate love, and learnt to love me in return, you would have ruptured every tie to come to me. Oh, Gladys! the day of your marriage was the death of all my hopes."

"My poor boy, and I knew nothing of it. And yet, Jemmie, even then you had so strong an attraction for me that I wanted you—do you remember it?—upon my wedding tour."

"We were destined for each other," says Mr. Brooke, with clenched teeth. "You should have had no other man than me—I, no other woman than yourself. See how, in spite of every obstacle, Fate has brought us together. You are married, and yet here you stand clasped in my arms, my

lips on yours, our hearts beating against each other, and here I swear that, married or single, you *shall* be mine."

"Oh! no, no, Jemmie!" cries Gladys, putting her hand upon his mouth. "You must not say that, you must not *think* it! What are you dreaming of? Do you forget I am Mountcarron's wife?"

"I wish to Heaven I *could* forget it."

"But listen to me, darling. Yes, that is right. *Smile*, Jemmie, and I will call you anything. Listen to me. Because I have been so weak as to let you see how much I love you, because I have listened to you, and let you kiss me, and been so happy in your company—you will not make me wretched now. You will not say things to shock me nor raise a bar against our intercourse? Oh! Jemmie, if you do anything to make me break with you, I shall wish I had never been born!"

"*Break with me!* How could you break with me? You could not be so cruel!" he answers, with blanched lips.



"Not if you are good and promise not to say things that you shouldn't. It is a misfortune we should have learned to care so much for one another; but we need not make it greater than it is. Let us go on caring for each other and being happy. But—but—we must never think of anything else."

"That may be very easy for you," he answers; "but it's not so easy for me. You've a cold nature, Gladys. You have often acknowledged it; but I am made of different materials. You don't care for kissing, and making love——"

"Don't I?" she says brokenly.

She comes up to him, and puts both her arms round his neck, and presses her face against his, and he can feel her tears wetting his cheeks and chin. Gladys is not a girl that cries easily. Mr. Brooke has never seen her give way to any sort of emotion before, and the fact, combined with her involuntary show of affection, touches him irresistibly. He seizes her in his arms, and kisses her at his will.

"My darling girl, forgive me! I was mad to mention it; but the knowledge of your love turned my brain. Regard it as the frenzy of a moment, and believe me that I will never offend you so again. I shall be all right to-morrow, dear Gladys. To-morrow I will be your sober cousin Jemmie again, and you shall never have reason to bring me to task for overstepping the privileges of our relationship."

They exchange another kiss—or, perhaps, two—on the strength of it, and after awhile they return home, well satisfied with themselves—the firmness of their resolutions, and the future which they intend to carve after a pattern of their own design.



## CHAPTER XI.

### “A CHALLENGE.”

MR. BROOKE tries hard to keep his promise, and whenever he appears to be on the verge of forgetfulness, Gladys is sure to remind him of it, and put him in his place again. At first he meets her reproofs with penitence, then with ill-humour, and finally he gives himself up to something very like despair. The Christmas visitors have all left Carronby. With the exception of a stray bachelor or two, who come and go like shadows, the earl and countess have the house to themselves, and the countess wants Jemmie's company more than ever.

But she has it less. Mr. Brooke's gloom and despondency increase daily.

His conduct and his actions become fitful and uncertain. Sometimes he is feverishly in love with her, and seems as if he could not bear her out of his sight. He follows her like a shadow, hanging on her every word, and scarcely taking his eyes off her face, until Gladys fears his manner will attract attention, and warns him of the danger. Whereupon, perhaps, he will disappear from Carronby for days and weeks, and if she meets him accidentally he will be silent, depressed, and misanthropical. Or he will feign illness till her woman's heart is racked with pain and anxiety for him, and when she ventures to express her feelings, he will laugh sarcastically, and ask how long it is since she has learned to sympathise with the trouble of which she is the sole cause, until he has brought the tears into her violet eyes by his unkindness, and then, in a moment, he is at her feet again, vowing she is the only woman he has ever loved, and that he will endure any sort of torture to his

life's end to have the joy of her companionship.

But the constant state of doubt, and fear, and anxiety, in which she lives, is beginning to have its effect upon Lady Mountcarron. She becomes miserable and restless when Jemmie is away. If they have parted in anger, she imagines he has flown from her side to that of another woman; or, that he has committed suicide, and his body is lying at that moment, perhaps, in some recess of the Carronby woods, shot to the heart by his own weapon.

And yet she has no peace in his presence. She thinks that every servant in Carronby perceives his preference for her (as doubtless they do), and that, dense as he is, at any moment Mountcarron may wake up to the same conviction. Her cheeks burn whenever Mr. Brooke's eyes are on her, and they turn pale when he looks another way. She has commenced, in fact, to live that life of torture which

men call "love"—to tremble at every shadow—to start at every word—to feel as though she should die in the presence of the object of her adoration, and yet to believe it impossible to live apart from him. And Mr. Brooke tries her patience sorely. He is suffering himself very keenly, and, man-like, he must make her suffer, too. One day she is all the world to him—the next she is worse than nothing. One day he will strain her to his heart, and nearly stifle her with kisses—the next he will refuse to touch her hand. He is alternately hot as fire and cold as ice, and Gladys, whose first experience this is of the master passion, does not know what to make of her lover. She is a woman, and, however much she might suffer from the contact, she would infinitely rather retain Mr. Brooke's companionship than lose it altogether. But men think and feel differently from women.

To Jemmie, the presence of Gladys—his, and yet not his—is a pain which becomes

at times unendurable, and sends him to the seclusion of Nutley for weeks together, whilst Lady Mountcarron frets over his absence, but is afraid to make any remark or enquiry concerning it.

Things go on much in this fashion until April is half over, and the Mountcarrons are talking of taking up their residence in London for the season. Gladys has been looking forward to this event with the utmost pleasure. She has dreamed of the operas and plays that she and Jemmie will attend together ; of the waltzes she will dance, encircled by his arm ; of the rides they will take in the Row, when every woman will envy her her handsome cavalier ; of the many opportunities they will find for that interchange of thought and feeling which has become a second nature to her. Gladys never dreams of the danger of such an intercourse. So long as Mountcarron sanctions by his silence her intimacy with his cousin, it does not strike her that the world may see and censure what

he is so backward to observe. Lovers are proverbially like the ostriches, who stick their heads in the sand and believe that no one will perceive their bodies. But Mr. Brooke is sharper-witted. He knows more of the world than Gladys. He is too good-looking to have been permitted to pass through it scathless, and he foresees the verdict it will pass upon them before they have gone through the scorching ordeal of a London season. As the time draws nearer, the conviction presses more hardly on him, and he becomes gloomier than before. It is two weeks now since he has shewn his face at Carronby, and Gladys is wretched. In his absence she gains some slight idea of the misery she is laying up in store for herself, but though she cries over it it never has the power to make her think it possible to resign him. To resign Jemmie, when she cannot endure to pass a fortnight without him! The idea is too ridiculous! Her life would become a blank.



One morning, when she has watched for him for a couple of hours in vain, Lady Mountcarron suddenly orders her pony-chaise and determines to drive over to luncheon with Lady Renton. She cannot bear this suspense, she tells herself. Jemmie may be ill or dying. The doubt will make *her* ill if it continues, and indeed she is looking very pale and weary-eyed, as she turns her little steeds in the direction of Nutley. In half-an-hour she has reached it, and Elinor receives her with a cordial welcome. Lady Renton has always liked her cousin's wife.

She has been grieved lately to see that she has become shyer of Nutley than she used to be, that she comes less often, and makes shorter visits, and is altogether more restrained than she was at first. So she is pleased when the little pony-chaise, with its miniature groom, draws up under the porch that morning, and runs out herself to disembarass Gladys of her rugs and wrappings.

"So glad to see you, dear. I thought you were never coming to Nutley again. What a change in the weather the last few days. It is almost as warm as summer."

"Yes," replies Gladys, her eyes wandering all round the garden in search of Jemmie, "the banks between this and Carronby are a mass of violets and primroses. How is little Hugh?"

"Oh, bonnie as usual, and up to all sorts of mischief, in which, I am sorry to say, his uncle encourages him."

"You accuse *me* of absence without leave," says Gladys, trying to speak carelessly, as they enter the pretty flower-scented drawing-room, "but we have not seen *your* face for a long time, Elinor!"

"My dear girl, you know how my time is taken up, with classes, and meetings, and correspondence. I can do very little for the cause my dear husband had so much at heart, except give it my time,

Gladys, and I don't think I could employ it more usefully."

"I am sure you couldn't," replies Lady Mountcarron, gazing at a framed photograph of Mr. Brooke which stands on the table next her, "and the season is so close at hand I suppose you want to get through all the work you can before it commences."

"My dear child, I never go to town for the season. It has no interest for me now. Besides, I wouldn't leave my boy for all the world, and the country is so lovely at this time of the year."

"Won't you come up to *us*, even for a few weeks, Elinor?"

"Not even to *you*, dear, much as I thank you for the invitation?"

"But you will be so lonely here for three whole months. You will miss your brother so much," says Gladys, at last summoning up courage to introduce the subject of her thoughts.

"I don't think Jemmie intends to leave

Nutley this summer," replies Lady Renton, in blissful unconsciousness of the shock she is giving her hearer ; "at least, so he tells me."

"*Not leave Nutley?*" exclaims Gladys, turning hot and cold.

"No, and I'm glad of it, for I don't think he is well. I have felt very uneasy about Jemmie lately. He is not at all like himself."

"What is the matter with him?" demands Lady Mountcarron, in a low voice.

"That is just what I can't tell you, my dear ; that is what makes me uneasy," replies Elinor. "If he had any palpable complaint, one might cure it, but he is simply out of sorts. He eats nothing. He positively goes day after day without taking sufficient food to keep his soul in his body. And he does not sleep properly. His valet tells me he walks up and down his room half the night. You know that must be very bad for a young man.

Jemmie is a great, strong, muscular fellow, whose frame requires rest and nourishment or it will soon tell upon him. But I cannot make him hear reason. If I mention the subject, he becomes annoyed, after the fashion of men, and declares there is nothing the matter with him. They are all alike in that particular. I daresay you have found Mountcarron just the same."

"Mountcarron is never ill," says Gladys.

"And this is the first time Jemmie has been so since I nursed him through the measles. I daresay you think I make an absurd fuss about him, Gladys, but you don't know what a dear boy he is. So loving and affectionate, and good. A person whom he cares for can do anything with him. I often tremble when I think of his falling in love, for I know he will throw his whole heart and soul into it, and become just what the woman chooses to make him. He is a jewel."

"You love him very dearly," says Lady Mountcarron, with a quivering smile.

"Indeed I do, and so would you, if you knew him as I do. There are ten years between us, you see, and our mother died at his birth, so he has always seemed more like a son than a brother to me. When I was a big girl of fifteen, and he was a little boy of five, you can have no idea of what a lovely child he was. I fairly worshipped him. Don't you think he is handsome now, Gladys?"

"Very handsome. It is the general opinion, is it not?"

"I believe so. I have never heard a dissentient one. But Jemmie is not looking well at present. He seems to me to have grown quite thin during the last month, and he is as pale as he can be. My darling boy," continues Lady Renton, with the tears shining in her kind eyes, "I do hope he is not really ill. It would break my heart if anything happened to my bonnie Jem."

Gladys has to sit and listen to all this in silence, whilst her guilty heart reproaches

her with being the cause of Mr. Brooke's illness, and the distress of his sister. The thought quenches her powers of conversation, and destroys her appetite, and she becomes so silent, and looks so dispirited, that Lady Renton expresses a hope at luncheon that she is not going to be ill too.

As soon as the meal is over, Gladys feels she can bear the oppression no longer ; but she will not leave Nutley without making one more effort to obtain news of Jemmie.

"I suppose," she says, as she re-assumes her hat and cloak, "I suppose—that your brother has not left Nutley?"

"Oh, dear no! What makes you think so?" enquires Elinor.

"Mountcarron was observing, this morning, that he had not seen him at Carronby for a long time—two weeks, I think."

"Really. I don't know where he goes then, for he is very seldom at home. I saw him for a moment this morning, and he has not been in since. He must spend his time

in the stables and the woods, I fancy. He is passionately fond of shooting. Must you really go, dear? It is not yet three."

"Yes; I must go," says Gladys. "The afternoons close in so soon still, and I have a little cold. Good-bye, Elinor. You will tell—tell Jemmie, that I called."

"Certainly; and send him up to Carronby to dinner this evening, if you'd like to see him. It would shake him up a little, and do him good."

"Mountcarron would be delighted, I know," replies Gladys, as she gathers up her reins and drives off. She is very, *very* miserable as she does so. There is a weight at her heart which she cannot shake off. The picture of Mr. Brooke, as drawn by his sister has penetrated to its very core. She tries to recall what took place at their last meeting, to decide if it is any word or act of hers that has brought him to such a state of despondency. And thinking over the past, she remembers that their farewell took place in the conservatory that opens



from the drawing-room at Carronby House, that she had gone there after dinner to pick some crimson japonica to put in her hair, and that Jemmie had followed her, and tried to kiss her, and that she had repulsed him, fearing they might be observed, and told him not to be silly. And he had left her then, with a curt "Good night," and without even offering her his hand. She had thought nothing of it at the moment. She had laughed, and called after him, not to be a silly boy, but to go home and sleep off his ill-humour. They had had so many little quarrels of that sort. They occurred almost every day. She had not dreamt that Jemmie would take this one so much to heart. But the more she thinks of it, the larger proportions it assumes in her eyes, until Gladys is ready, woman-like, to take all the blame to herself, for their estrangement.

She thinks of Jemmie not eating and not sleeping, of his becoming pale and thin, and all for her sake, until her tender heart

aches with pity and self-reproach. At last she has worked her imagination up to such a pitch, that she feels she can bear inaction no longer. She stops her ponies, and bids her little groom take them back to the house, as she intends to walk home through the park. The carriage is soon out of sight, and Gladys enters her domains by a side gate, and proceeds on her way. It will be a comfort, she thinks, even to walk over the paths which they have trod together. And then, who knows? perhaps Jemmie will be up to dinner to-night. Perhaps he will accept the fact of her visiting Nutley as she wishes him to accept it, and understand that she is uneasy at his long absence. How warmly she will welcome him! How readily she will seize the first opportunity to let the dear boy know by a look, a whisper, a pressure of the hand, that all is right again between them, and if he wants kisses, why, he shall have a bushel of them, if he will only promise not to desert her again.

And as Gladys is thinking thus, and longing for the moment of reunion, she turns a corner in the woodland path, and comes upon Mr. Brooke himself.

He is resting on the lover's seat—a rustic bench, carved from a fallen oak—and his whole attitude is one of the utmost despondency. His lithe young limbs are thrown along the length of the seat, and his face is downwards, hidden upon his outstretched arms. Lady Mountcarron is standing by his side before he is aware of her presence.

“Jemmie!” she cries, with all her heart in her voice, “Jemmie, what is the matter with you?”

Mr. Brooke starts violently, jumps to his feet, shakes the moss and lichen from his velveteen suit, and holds out his hand to her with a frosty smile.

“Ah! Gladys, is it really you? How are you?”

She dashes aside his proffered hand.

“I will not take your hand, Jemmie, I

will not speak to you, until you tell me why you have never been near me for a fortnight."

"I should think *you* could answer that question better than myself."

"I can't, then. I know no reason why you should have made me wretched. If you want me to believe that you have quarrelled with me just because I asked you not to kiss me before the butler, why it is incomprehensible, and I cannot understand it."

"Oh! it's not *that*!" says Mr. Brooke, with a wearied air. "It's not one day, or another, Gladys, nor one quarrel, or another. It's the whole miserable business."

"I don't understand you."

"You *must* understand me, then. It's no use beating about the bush any longer. The fact is, I cannot stand this sort of life. It is killing me by inches, and we must put an end to it one way or another."

"How can we put an end to it, Jemmie?"

"You must either be mine, or I must leave you altogether. You must give up Mountcarron, or you must give up me."

"Oh! Jemmie, you promised me not to speak of that."

"The time is past for my promises or your reproaches, Gladys. You have tortured me long enough, and, once for all, I will endure it no longer. Do you suppose I am going to live my life as a hanger-on at Carronby House, wronging my cousin with every look I give you, every word I utter? No! I have courage to take you from him, to wrest you from his arms, and defy him to do his worst, for your love is mine, and love gives me the right to you; but what I do henceforth I will do openly. I will not share even your kisses with him or any man. You must make your choice between us."

Gladys stands opposite to him, rooted

to the spot by the vehemence of his words.

"Choose between you and Mountcarron?" she falters.

"Yes, choose between Mountcarron and me," he repeats. "Either stay at Carronby and be his wife, or leave Carronby for ever and be *my* wife. You cannot keep both of us!"

"I don't want to keep both of you, Jemmie. You know—you *know* that I want only you. But don't ask me to decide so soon."

"You must decide now—now, at once, and for ever. Either I leave Carronby with you to-morrow, or I leave it alone, never to see your face again."

Still, she tries to temporise with him.

"Oh, Jemmie, don't be in such a hurry. Come home and dine with me, there's a dear boy, and we will talk it over in the evening."

"It is impossible, Gladys. Under any circumstances, I shall not enter Carronby

House again—never break bread at my cousin's table! I have done him too much wrong already. I never cared for him, but, by Jove, he deserved better treatment at my hands, if only in return for his hospitality. But you bewitched me, Gladys. You have bewitched me until I have forgotten honour, and the claims of relationship, and everything, except your maddening beauty, and the knowledge of your preference for me. But it is over now—over for ever more! You must be mine, or his. You must give up him, or you must lose me.”

“Oh, Jemmie,” she says, sobbing, “*I cannot lose you!*”

At this assertion, and the sound of her tears, Mr. Brooke's mood completely changes. All the fire and the vehemence die out of his face, and there is nothing left there but a look of triumph, and overwhelming tenderness. He draws nearer to the weeping girl and takes her in his arms.

"*I knew it*," he says, with a long drawn sigh of relief. "I knew that your heart would speak for itself. No, you cannot lose me, Gladys, and I cannot lose you. How we have suffered this past fortnight. What would it be to spend a lifetime apart from one another? Think how young we both are, and what a long vista of years, in all probability, stretches out before us. Picture to yourself, rising in the morning without the prospect of meeting during the day, and lying down at night without a hope for the morrow! Gladys, it would kill us. It would be a trial beyond human endurance."

"Oh, yes. I cannot—*cannot*—lose you," she repeats, clinging closely to him.

"Then listen to me, dearest. The sooner this struggle is over the better. I shall have no peace now till I have taken you beyond his reach. No, don't sob so, dear, and tremble. Of what are you afraid? Do you think my arms are not strong



enough to defend you? That my heart is not a sure enough haven—that my love is too weak to keep and wear that which I won?”

“No, no!—only, it is so sudden, and I am frightened.”

“You shall never feel fear again when you have given me the right to protect you, Gladys. But try and understand what I am about to say to you. To-morrow morning you will receive a note from Elinor, asking you to come over and stay a couple of days at Nutley, which will give you the opportunity to send over what luggage you may require to take with you in a light cart, which I will be on the look out for, and see unladen, without exciting suspicion from the house. At three o’clock—are you listening to me, darling?”

“Yes, yes, Jemmie.”

“At three o’clock, I will be at this gate—the one by which you have just entered. If you can walk through the park to join

me so much the better—if not, you must drive round by the road, and when you reach this point, I will meet you, as if by accident, and invite you to walk the rest of the way, and we will send the carriage back to Carronby. I will have another ready for you just round the corner, and we will go straight to Aylmer—it will be safer than taking the train at Carronby, where we might meet someone who knows us—and thence to London, and the morning after shall see us safely landed in Paris. Will that suit you, Gladys?" he asks in conclusion.

"Anything," she murmurs, "so I am *with you*."

"Oh, my darling," he exclaimed, passionately, "you shall never regret the sacrifice you make for me. We will be so happy, Gladys. Think of the long days spent together—*always* together—in France, or Italy, or Spain—on the shores of the Adriatic, or in the isles of the Mediterranean sea—wherever your fancy may

dictate to you, it will make no difference to me, so long as you are mine, and I am with you. Think of the pleasure of a mutual intercourse without limit, and without restraint, an intercourse which no one will have the right to curtail, or dare to put an end to. Oh, Gladys, the thought is maddening. My brain is spinning round with anticipation. Were you to keep me waiting one moment beyond to-morrow, I should go out of my mind."

"I will not keep you waiting, darling. I will come."

"At three o'clock precisely. Try and be punctual, because the carriage I must have in waiting might excite remark if kept standing still too long."

"It shall not wait for me, Jemmie," she says feverishly, "and now you must let me go and obliterate the traces of these tears before I appear at dinner."

"After to-morrow," he says, gaily, "there shall be no tears." He presses her passion-

ately to him for a moment, and then releases her.

"Good-bye, my own angel," he says, with a last kiss, "after to-morrow there shall be no tears."

*END OF VOLUME I.*

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